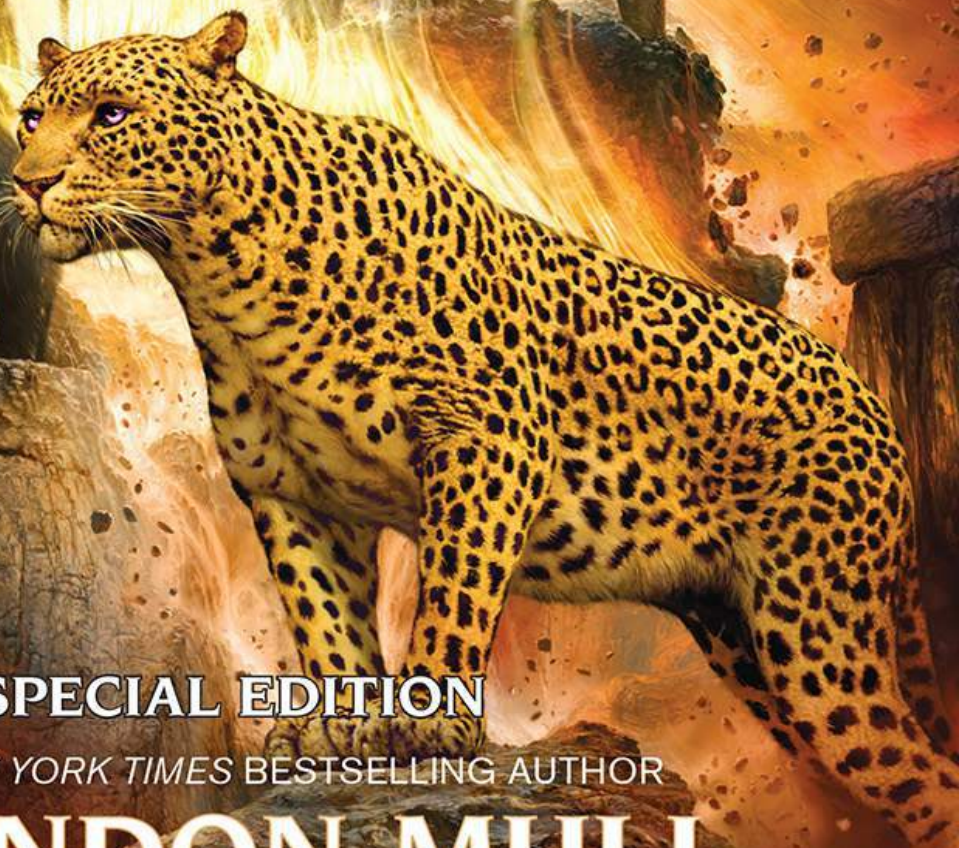


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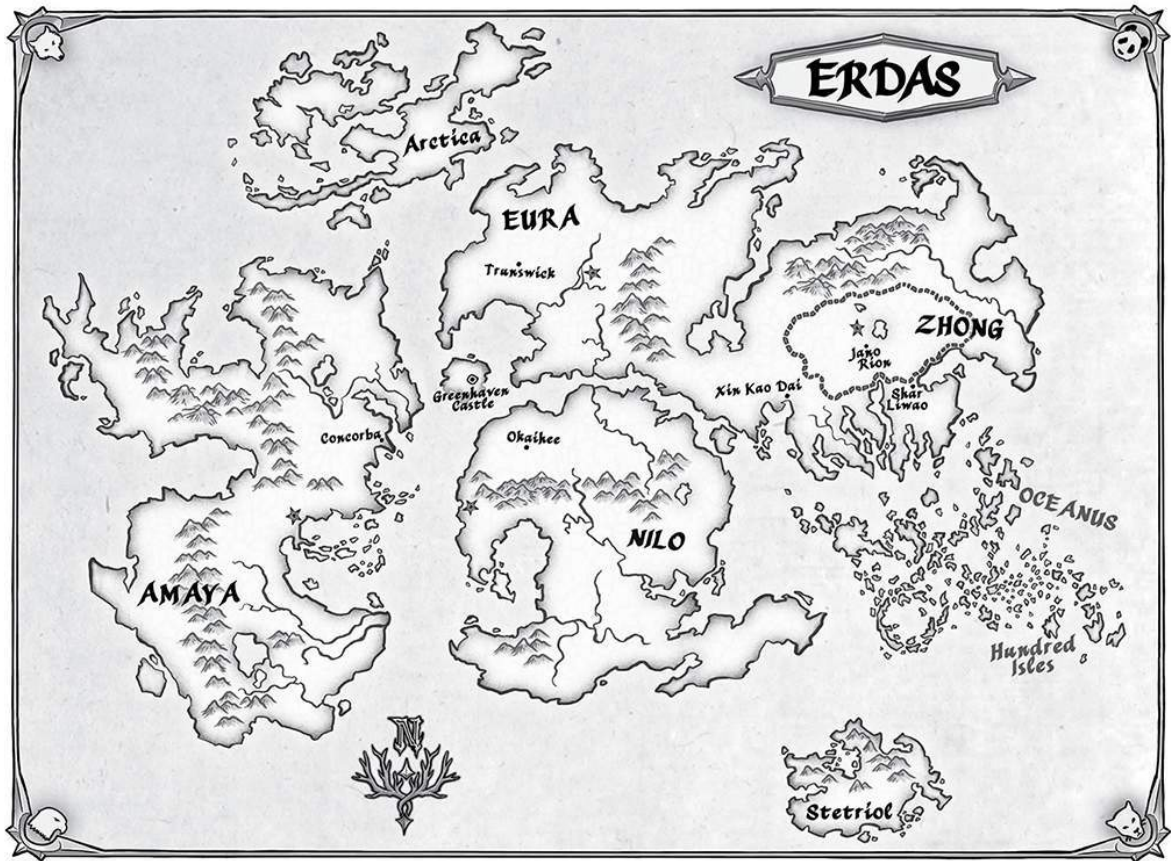
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Kovo





RISE OF THE REPTILE KING

By Nick Eliopulos

FELIANDOR, BOY KING OF STETRIOL, PEERED INTO THE shadows, pondering his next move. The ocean was at his back. Before him, a dark forest, and his destiny.

He dug the toe of his boot into the sand and thought of his troubled kingdom. From a hidden pocket in his travel cloak, he pulled out a small glass vial, empty except for a meager drop of amber liquid. He turned the vial in his fingers and watched the droplet catch the fading sunlight.

This liquid held the power to change . . . everything.
It was called the Bile.



Feliandor's father had been a good king, and Feliandor wanted to be a good king too. It was for that reason and that reason alone that he held court. Once a week, the doors to the throne room were opened to any citizen who desired an audience with the king. It was a tradition his father had started years before, and one that had made him immensely popular. "We live in a great tower," he'd once told his son, "but the distance between a king and his subjects should never be greater than a single voice can travel."

And so each week, Feliandor interacted with the people of his kingdom. Usually that meant his subjects would come from far and wide to complain about petty matters while Feliandor listened carefully, nodded thoughtfully, and then offered reassuring words — and, when possible, solutions.

It did not come naturally to him, and it never seemed to get any easier. But he always had two allies beside him through the ordeal: to his left, Salen, the royal adviser, and to his right, Jorick, captain of the king's guard. With the knowledge and power they represented, he felt that he could accomplish nearly anything.

The people seemed determined to put this to the test.

"My king, you must do something," said the man before him now, an aging blacksmith named Gerard. He gestured to the younger man at his side. "He's ruined my livelihood."

The younger man, Donnat, also a blacksmith, crossed his arms defiantly. "The old man hardly needs any help there. It's not my fault he can't keep up with the times! The customers have spoken, and my revolutionary smithing technique —"

"Your smithing technique is pathetic!" Gerard interrupted. "You sacrifice quality for speed. Your swords would shatter against a turtle shell."

"Now he's resorting to slander, Your Majesty. Unless he means to suggest he's actually attacked turtles with my wares."

Feliandor wished he could laugh at the spectacle of two grown men acting in this way, but the hall was crowded with onlookers. If he could solve this problem, it would be proof of his wisdom and prudence — and there was no better time to appear wise than when one had witnesses.

Fel cleared his throat, and the sound echoed. The throne room was ancient and drab, a box of rough stone with narrow slits overhead to let in daylight. The walls had been adorned with colorful tapestries and the ceremonial swords and shields of kings past, but the decorations did little to brighten the gloomy space. It had always felt like a tomb to Fel. Even in happier days.

The throne itself, however, was a masterpiece. Placed upon a stone platform and crafted entirely of Stetriolan iron, the chair was embellished with the features of a half-dozen animals: the outspread wings of a great bird of prey, the patterned scales of a reptile, the clawed feet of some vicious predator. It wasn't comfortable, but it was beautiful. And intimidating. Fel had never seen anything else quite like it, and he doubted either of the smiths before him were capable of such craft.

He turned his gaze on the older of the two, Gerard. “But *he* was *your* apprentice?” he asked.

“That’s right,” the older smith huffed. “And I thought that once I gave up on teaching him, this louse would set up shop elsewhere. Not two doors down from my anvil, which has been serving our town for generations!”

Donnat shrugged. “Every town in Stetriol has an established blacksmith. How am I supposed to earn a living if the older generation won’t get out of the way?”

“I see,” Fel said. “So there’s not enough smithing work to go around. Does that about sum it up?”

“That’s right,” Gerard said. “I’m not afraid of a little competition, but I won’t resort to this charlatan’s tactics.”

“Then you’ll never beat my prices,” Donnat said lightly.

Feliandor turned to his adviser and lowered his voice. “Salen, what do you have for me?”

“Hm, yes,” Salen said slowly, stroking his white beard . . . slowly. Salen did everything slowly. “This raises some interesting questions . . . concerning the crown’s role in commerce. I’d like to set up a committee led by key figures from the merchants’ guild, and open discussions —”

Feliandor rolled his eyes dramatically. “Salen, so help me, if you put me in one more meeting, I’ll have you exiled. I want a solution right now.” He turned to his other side. “Any ideas, Jorick?”

Jorick grunted in a way that perfectly communicated his lack of patience for squabbling merchants. “I could take each of them in hand and smash them together until we had a single large blacksmith where before there were two scrawny blacksmiths.”

Fel smiled despite himself. “Excellent thought, Jorick, but let’s call that Plan B.” He cleared his throat again, silencing the mutterings of the crowd, and returned his attention to the men who awaited his judgment. “All right, all right. If the problem, at heart, is that there is not enough smithing work, then let me see about throwing some business your way. It’s about time the king’s guard was outfitted with new equipment. It’s a big enough job to keep you both tending your fires for months. Is this acceptable?”

The older smith nodded. “It would be my honor to provide arms and armor to the guard.”

The younger smith smiled. “But I could do it twice as fast for a fraction of the cost.”

“None of that,” Feliandor admonished. “There will be no shortcuts, and you’ll each receive the same rate for your work. See my quartermaster on the way out, and he’ll get you started.”

Fel turned a smug smile on his adviser as the two men left the hall. “There, see? Everyone leaves happy.”

Salen didn’t return the king’s smile. “A short-term solution, my king, merits only a short celebration.”

“Why, thank you, Salen, I believe a celebration would be lovely. I’ll ask you to make the arrangements. Now, what’s next?” He turned to the page whose job it was to keep the proceedings orderly. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Who has another knot for their king to untangle?”

The page paled. “Apologies, King Feliandor, but that is all for today.”

“Surely not!” Fel scoffed and looked about the room. There were several dozen people in attendance. Had they all come simply to gawk? Fel thought they should be falling over themselves for the opportunity to speak directly to their king.

As his eyes roamed the hall, they fell upon a woman he’d never seen before. Though she was but one face among the crowd, she stood out immediately as Niloan. It was more than her dark skin that marked her as such. Equally striking were the Niloan garments she wore — finery of vibrant primary colors, the kind one could only achieve with Niloan dyes produced by Niloan craftsmen using Niloan plants. Garments so colorful were a luxury in Stetriol, and rare.

A foreigner at his court was an unusual enough thing that Feliandor took instant notice, and he wondered what business she had there. Her bearing was regal, her chin held high. Was it possible that she was there as a representative of Niloan royalty? And if so, why hadn’t she presented herself, as was the custom?

Suddenly Feliandor felt very much on display.

“I know,” he said loudly. “Let’s have an update on the arbor project. Where is Xana?”

There was a rustling in the crowd as a Stetriolan woman stepped forth. Xana never wore the traditional skirts of a woman of the court, favoring instead the more practical trousers and boots as befit her role as the region’s foremost botanist. Even her finest tunic, which she wore now, showed the mark of her profession, lightly stained by grass and dirt.

She bowed before the king, then rose and looked him in the eye. “Forgive me, my king, but I haven’t prepared an update.”

“No need to be so formal, Xana.” Feliandor smiled. “I am simply curious to know of any progress.”

“There is no progress to report, I’m afraid.”

Salen lifted a gnarled finger. “My king, perhaps it would be best to allow Xana the opportunity to prepare an official report. I’d be happy to schedule a time —”

Feliandor moaned loudly. “I’m sure you would, Salen. I’m sure nothing would make you happier.” He rose from the throne, taking a step down toward Xana, who stood at attention at the foot of the platform’s steps. “I’d simply like to know what your people have been up to this past month. Have you planted any trees?”

Xana nodded. “We planted four hundred saplings imported from foreign lands. Twelve different species. Of those, only thirty percent survived.”

“Thirty percent! Well, that’s . . .” Feliandor paused. “That’s more than one hundred trees that weren’t there before. That’s something.”

Xana shook her head, less nervous now that she was in her element. “None of the trees will last a year. Their root structures are meant for hardier topsoil. Those plants that don’t die from lack

of nutrients and water will eventually grow too big for their own roots. They'll simply topple over."

Fel bristled. He felt the eyes of the crowd on him, but kept his gaze locked on Xana. "Very well," he said, hoping he sounded calm and full of grace. "I will double your budget for the next quarter, Xana, but you must promise me that you'll have something to show for it."

"I cannot do that, my king."

"Can't promise me results?"

"I mean that I cannot in good conscience accept any more of the crown's gold. To change the flatlands into a forest requires not just trees, but an entirely different environment. Short of learning to control the weather, I don't know what else we can do."

Fel stood silent, feeling his anger and disappointment like a physical force. His face radiated heat, and he knew that he was blushing before the entire crowd. He clenched his fists and ground his teeth together, but the more he fought the sensation, the warmer his cheeks grew.

He caught sight of the Niloan woman again, who watched him without a hint of emotion. When their eyes met, he was the first to look away.

Xana appeared nervous again as the silence dragged on. Finally she spoke up. "I'm so sorry, my king. The climate is too arid. The soil is all but infertile. There will be no forest at the heart of Stetriol."

Suddenly the heavy doors to the room were thrown open, and a loud bang echoed throughout the space. All heads turned to the entrance, where a mangy, wild-eyed man with a scraggly beard hobbled into view, carrying a soiled canvas sack.

Jorick drew his sword. His men, stationed throughout the room, did the same.

“Hold,” said the king, placing a steadying hand on Jorick’s sword arm.

“Good King Fel!” the man cried out in a singsong voice. “Good King Fel, the Good King Fel, now all that’s left is you.” It sounded like a line from a song, but Feliandor couldn’t place the tune.

“State your business,” Jorick barked.

The man continued his slow shuffle toward the throne, and the crowd parted to let him pass. He hoisted the sack higher onto his shoulder, grunting before he answered. “I’ve been to the other side, and now I’m back. He told me to. Like I told Jace not to die. But nobody listens!”

Salen gave a start of surprise, then took a step toward Feliandor. “That is Lord Griswald,” he hissed in the king’s ear.

Fel’s jaw dropped. “By the Beasts, you’re right. I was sure the man was dead.”

Lord Gareth Griswald was a national hero, most famous for being the first person to reach the peak of Mount Crimson, tallest of the Red Mountains. It was that accomplishment that had made him the natural choice for Feliandor’s very first pronouncement as king: Griswald would lead a team of explorers beyond the Red Mountains, into the heart of Stetriol, and out the other side.

While the coastline of the island nation was well documented and heavily settled, few had ventured into the interior of the continent. Everything they’d seen had led them to believe the entire interior was an arid wasteland. Yet Feliandor had always held out hope that somewhere beyond view was an oasis. Perhaps a great interior lake surrounded by lush forests, or an overgrown caldera suitable as farmland.

But Griswald had disappeared beyond the mountains more than a year ago. And he did not have the look of a man who had spent

the time enjoying an oasis.

Feliandor raised his arms and raised his voice. “People of Stetriol! Lord Griswald is returned.”

If his intention had been to calm the crowd, he had failed. A murmur passed through it, a thread of shock and horror as the people realized the man before them was their lost hero, returned to them in much worse shape than he’d left.

He was close enough now that Feliandor could smell the sour stink of him, like milk left out in the sun.

“Uh, my good man,” Fel said so that everyone could hear, “you’ve clearly been through an ordeal. Let’s set you up with a bath and a hot meal. Salen here can schedule a time for us to talk.”

It might have been Fel’s imagination, but Griswald’s sack seemed to be . . . moving.

“Jace died,” the man said.

Fel turned to Salen. “Jace?” he whispered.

“One of his party,” the adviser answered under his breath. “The young cartographer.”

“I wrote it down to remember,” Griswald said from the center of the hall, shuffling still closer. “Jace died by toad, Janas by bee. Marcus . . . Marcus by thirst ’neath a lone pine tree.”

“Oh, my . . . His entire party is dead,” Salen said.

“Get him out of here, Jorick,” Fel hissed.

Jorick signaled to his men and took a step forward. Despite Griswald’s obvious delirium, the advancing guards were not lost on him.

“No!” the man shouted. He gripped the sack and swung it off of his shoulder, wielding it like a weapon. “No, I must give the king his gift!”

Salen put a hand on Fel’s shoulder. “My king . . .”

Fel’s feet felt rooted in place.

As the guards approached Griswald from all sides, the man turned over the sack, dumping its contents on the throne room floor.

Snakes. Dozens of them. They writhed upon the ground like a sinister kaleidoscope, all color and slither and hiss.

And then they began to untangle themselves and launch off in every direction.

The hall exploded into chaos. As the guards descended upon the snakes with their swords, bystanders fled for the doors, shoving and shouting. Griswald stood in the center of the room, cackling. A scream rang out, and Fel saw a particularly speedy snake launch itself at a little girl, baring its fangs. Before the snake could strike, a streak of brown appeared, slicing it in two. The streak was an animal, moving so quickly across the stone floor that Fel could not get a good view of it, but it looked like a rodent of some kind, long and sinuous, almost snakelike itself.

“You rule a kingdom of dust and snakes!” Griswald howled. “There is nothing beyond the mountains but death!”

And then Jorick was dragging Fel backward, to the doorway hidden in the curtains behind the throne. The captain shoved him inside before turning back to the chaos of the throne room. Salen followed Fel through the doorway and barred the door behind them.

In the sudden dark, with the screams of his subjects still echoing beyond the door, Fel felt overwhelmed and much younger than his years. For a moment, he was a boy again, and Salen was the grandfatherly figure he’d known his entire life. Fel teetered into the old man’s arms, trembling. If Salen was surprised, he didn’t show it, only held Fel until he had composed himself once more.

“Are you all right, Fel — my king?” Salen asked, his hand upon Fel’s shoulder.

“I want that man in the dungeons,” Fel said, straightening his iron crown.

“But he’s a hero. The people —”

“Just do it, Salen. Lock him up and throw away the key.”



That night, Feliandor was restless. Little wonder, after the day he’d had.

He found himself wandering the halls of the castle, which were never truly dark nor fully empty. Candles remained lit throughout the night for the benefit of the guards stationed around the castle. The soldiers stood rigid and expressionless, so much so that Fel often failed to even think of them as people. They were more like the castle’s furniture.

At length he came to the great hall, where the portraits of Stetriol’s kings were on display. He walked past the procession of his ancestors, coming to a stop just below the painting of his parents. They had bucked tradition by insisting that both king and queen appear together in the official state portrait. They had always acted as equals.

And if Feliandor’s father had been loved by the people, well, his mother had practically been worshipped. She had walked among their subjects at every opportunity, championing public health projects and — to the nobility’s dismay — public literacy. It had been an eccentric cause, but to the surprise of her detractors, the people took to it with great zeal.

Working together, his parents had left Stetriol better than they'd found it. There was no debating that. It was a fact.

It was Feliandor's rotten luck that he had inherited a kingdom at its peak. It had nowhere to go but down. Stetriol was in a state of decline. Many people throughout the land were looking for a scapegoat, someone to blame as their lives became more difficult. They didn't blame geography or weather patterns. They blamed their king.

Fel studied the portrait now. For the hundredth time he looked for something of himself in his parents' faces. It was as if he'd inherited only their plainest features — and their problems.

Stetriol's decline wasn't his fault; Fel, at least, knew this. The coasts were vibrant, rich with life and graced with moderate weather. Just a little bit inland, though, the coastal area ran into the Red Mountains, a range that ringed the interior of the continent. And that interior was arid, inhospitable, home to ghastly, venomous animals and little else.

The vast expanse of Feliandor's kingdom was unable to support human life, and the coasts were getting crowded. Thanks in part to his parents' reforms, the populations of the coastal towns were booming. The people had nowhere to go. There wasn't enough work. Poverty was rampant, and that had led to crime and unrest.

The arbor project had been his last desperate hope. If the land was the problem, then he would change the land. He had sent a dozen of the kingdom's most able colonists to erect a temporary settlement just on the other side of the mountains. Their goal: to manipulate the soil so that it could support a wider variety of plant life. He wanted Stetriol to boast a Niloan jungle or a Euran forest.

But everything they had planted would die.

Movement near the ground caught Fel's attention. At first he feared it was a snake, escaped from the afternoon's grim adventure. But then he saw it clearly. It was a mammal — the same rodent-like creature he'd seen in the throne room earlier that day.

"Hello there," Fel said. "What are you up to?" He realized too late that he must sound childish to the guard standing sentry in the hallway.

The creature stood on its hind legs, clicked its teeth at him, then fell to its four feet and walked away. It stopped partway up the hall and turned its head to look back at him.

"You want me to follow you?" Fel asked.

The mammal clicked again, then continued up the path. Its obvious intelligence left no doubt — this was a spirit animal. Fel had suspected as much when he'd seen it earlier, though he knew it didn't belong to any of his guards. His curiosity was piqued. He turned to the nearby guard. "You there," he said, and the sentry somehow managed to stand even straighter. "Come with me. And stay close."

The animal led them to an outside courtyard. The night air was balmy and smelled of the ocean. For a moment, Fel felt a rush of joy. The best days of his childhood had been spent at the beach, away from the drab castle, and the smell of salt water on the wind was enough to take him back to more carefree times — but only momentarily. Then a figure stepped from the shadows, and the guard at Fel's back drew his sword. Fel remembered very suddenly that his life had not been carefree in some time.

The figure dropped to one knee. "I come in peace," she said.

Fel recognized her instantly as the Niloan woman from the throne room. He held out a hand to stop the guard's advance. "Hold. It's all right." He looked over his shoulder at the guard and

lifted an eyebrow. “But keep your sword ready.” He turned back to the woman, who remained on one knee and kept her gaze cast upon the ground — although the furry animal now stood atop her shoulder and glared brazenly back at him.

“I don’t suppose you’re here because Nilo has reconsidered the terms of our latest trade agreement.” Until recently, Nilo’s need for iron had been a major source of income for Stetriol. That had changed when Nilo’s rulers cut a deal with the new Amayan government, who sold their ore for practically nothing.

But the woman was not there to discuss iron. “I’m afraid not, Your Majesty,” she said.

“Please stand.”

She did as he said, meeting his eyes. She was quite a bit taller than him, and the animal on her shoulder only made her seem bigger. But Fel would not be intimidated in his own home.

“The animal is yours?”

“Vox. My spirit animal.” With a flash of light, the animal disappeared, and in its place was a serpentine black tattoo winding around her shoulder and upper arm. “He is a mongoose. They are native to my homeland.”

“So you are Niloan. But not here on state business.”

“I am here on behalf of another. A benefactor who has asked me to present you with a gift.” She spoke flatly, without a hint of emotion, which only served to stoke the fires of Fel’s impatience.

“Surely this could wait until daylight. My adviser, Salen, likes nothing more than to fill my schedule.”

“I approached your adviser earlier today, my liege. But he turned me away.”

“Excuse me?”

“I attempted to go through the proper channels. Your Salen wished to keep us from meeting. Yet I simply could not leave

without taking the opportunity to speak with you.”

Fel smiled to mask his concern. Something wasn't right here. “Well, then this gift must be good.”

“Greater than you could dream.” She gestured to a satchel at her hip, eyeing the guard at Fel's shoulder, clearly hesitant to make any sudden moves. “May I?”

“Of course.”

She reached into the satchel, producing a slender, stoppered glass vial — the type alchemists used for their elixirs. And indeed there was liquid of some kind within it. She held the vial between her thumb and forefinger. “This is known as the Bile,” she said. “The name is a joke of sorts. Despite the taste, I assure you it's quite a wonder.”

“Ah, let me guess.” Feliandor crossed his arms. “A cure-all tincture. Your mysterious benefactor is a great mixer of medicines and elixirs, and he'd like a royal endorsement. You know, I once tried an elixir for vitality, and it turned my tongue green for a week.”

“This is nothing like that, my liege.” The woman bared her teeth in an exultant smile. “What would you say if I told you that Vox and I have been acquainted for only three months' time?”

“I'd say you were lying. Spirit animals manifest by the age of thirteen or not at all. And without meaning any offense, I can tell that you . . . are not thirteen.”

“And you *are* thirteen. Does it not strike you as unfair?” She hazarded a small step forward. “That you should have so much power, yet no say in whether you are among the chosen who become Marked?”

Feliandor shrugged. “I'm learning that power brings with it very few perks. And my parents did just fine without spirit animals of their own. *Chosen* may be overstating it.”

“Yet you seem like a man who is loath to leave anything to chance. Your arbor project, for example . . .”

“Yes, well, there’s a lesson in that debacle somewhere too.”

“The lesson, if I may, could be this: If you cannot change your land, then why not change your people?”

Feliandor was silent at that. Eventually she continued.

“With one dose of this liquid, a person of any age can force the spirit animal bond upon any natural animal. And with that bond comes power — the power to become fiercer, faster, and stronger than before. I myself can attest to this. I have benefitted immensely from my association with Vox.”

Fel grunted. “It sounds excellent, but believe it or not, one of the first things they tell you as king is not to drink anything a stranger hands you.”

“This sample is yours, to do with as you wish.” She stooped low and placed the vial on the ground, then stood and took a step back. “I have left a second gift in your throne room: a caged bird. If you find the Bile to your liking and would care to meet my patron, simply release the bird into the wild. That will be the signal that you are ready to meet upon a certain beach in the Hundred Isles — the locals call it Nightshade Island. If the bird is not released within five days, or if you release the bird but fail to arrive shortly thereafter, my benefactor shall move on to others who may be more interested in his offer.”

“This is absurd.” Fel spoke the words harshly, but his eyes were on the vial. “How did you get into the throne room?”

“The mongoose steps lightly, and now, so do I. Five days, my king. Think on it.” In a blur, she ducked back into the shadows and hurdled over the garden wall, faster than Feliandor had ever seen a human move before. She moved, to his mind, more like the mongoose than a person.

And she had left behind not just the vial, but a tattered scroll as well.



When Salen stormed into Feliandor’s room at dawn, Jorick at his heel, the king was still dressed, having not slept at all.

“My king!” Salen said, spittle flying into his beard. “What is this the guards tell me of you . . . you entertaining a dangerous stranger in the middle of the night?”

Salen was as angry as he’d ever seen him. But Feliandor was angrier.

“Oh, I assure you, Salen, that she was the one entertaining me. She left this behind.” His tone was icy as he unrolled a scroll — the type that his subjects liked to circulate and post in taverns ever since his mother had succeeded in raising the literacy rate.

The centerpiece of the scroll was a crudely drawn cartoon. It bore the legend “Fool’s Gold,” and featured a caricature of Feliandor — his sharp nose was a dramatic beak, his bushy eyebrows resembled caterpillars, and he practically swam in his oversized clothing: A huge crown fell over his ears and a cape trailed behind him like a curtain. The comically short cartoon king stood upon a footstool, straining to reach a potted plant, which he was watering with a tin jug, the type gardeners used. Only “watering” wasn’t the right word, for pouring forth from the jug was not water but coins.

In the background, a family of beggars looked on, starving as their king poured gold onto a plant.

“Is this what people think of me?” Feliandor seethed. “Is this what they say behind my back?”

“Patience, my king,” Salen urged, his own anger completely gone. “This is the work of but one person. Do not presume he speaks for all your subjects.”

“Is that so? And how many of my subjects have laid eyes on this drawing or another like it? How many will easily forget it? It is incendiary! It is unforgivable. I would have this ‘artist’ brought before me.”

“I would advise —”

“I would advise you keep your opinion to yourself, Salen. This is a matter of security, and therefore falls under Jorick’s purview. Not yours.” He turned to Jorick, who seemed surprised to be drawn into the argument. “Captain, have the person responsible for this brought in immediately.”

Jorick nodded slowly, in the manner of someone who was carefully contemplating what he would say next. “Am I to understand, my king, that this person is to be arrested?”

Feliandor paused only for a moment. “Yes. And why not? To undermine the king in this way . . . it is dangerous. Have him thrown into the dungeon until I say otherwise.”

Salen clucked his tongue and shook his head sadly.

“Enough, Salen. I’m not in the mood.” Feliandor threw the scroll down upon the desk as he turned to exit the room. “And I’m not that short!”



Late that night, Fel found himself once again before the portrait of his parents. He tried to imagine their faces distorted by a petty

cartoonist's hand. He couldn't picture it, couldn't find the flaws that the artist would need to exploit.

The vial of liquid was in his pocket. His fingers had kept finding it in idle moments throughout the day. Salen and Jorick both knew he had it, but he'd managed to avoid being alone with them since the morning's confrontation. He knew that wouldn't last.

He turned away from his parents to regard the nearest sentry. He was fairly confident it was the same man who had held the post the night before.

Fel took the vial from the pocket and lifted it into view. "You know what this is?" he asked the guard.

"It is called Bile, my king," the man said, standing rigid and unblinking.

Fel smirked. "And does your captain know what it is?"

The guard swallowed, anxiety creeping into his eyes if not his stance. "He does, my king. I told him all I knew of it, my king. He and the royal adviser." He swallowed again. "As is my duty."

"I see," said Fel. He cradled the vial in his palm, looking upon it as he addressed the guard. "How . . . dutiful. Tell me, guardsman, what would you have done if the woman last night had become hostile?"

"I would have fought her, my king."

"And if she had loosed an arrow, aimed for my heart?"

"I would have stopped it, my king."

"Even if the only way to stop it had been to step before it?"

"Even so, my king." The guard had the good sense not to hesitate.

"And if I were to tell you I intended to drink this potentially harmful substance?"

Fel brought his eyes up to the guard, who kept his own eyes forward. He had obviously not been prepared for the shift in the line of questioning.

“I would . . . I would stop you?” he ventured.

“Would you!” Fel said, nearly laughing. “Would you stop me?”

“Of course not, my king,” the guard said quickly. “I would never . . .”

Fel couldn't help feeling a pang of pity for the man.

“Here's what I'm truly wondering, guardsman. I'm wondering whether you would drink the substance first. Would that not be a bit like stepping before an arrow? A bit better, in fact.” Fel smiled. “I should think you stood a better chance with the liquid.”

The guardsman opened his mouth, but his answer was cut off by Jorick's voice, echoing from down the hallway: “Leave the boy alone.”

At first Fel thought that the captain had called *him* a boy, but then he realized that Jorick had been referring to the sentry. Was he particularly young for a guardsman? It was true he didn't have the facial hair that was the popular style among Jorick's men.

Fel turned to face Jorick as he approached. “I don't intend to make any of your people drink it,” Fel said. He couldn't keep the defensiveness from his voice. “It's only a little logic game.”

“I'll drink it,” Jorick said.

“You?” Fel said with a sense of genuine surprise — and a flash of guilt.

“Your logic is . . . logical,” Jorick explained. “But I cannot ask anything of my men that I wouldn't first do myself.”

Fel began to protest, but Jorick placed a large hand upon his shoulder. It was such a fatherly gesture that the king fell instantly silent.

“I know when you’ve got it in your head to do something. And regardless of what some idiot has scrawled on a scroll, I believe in you.”

Fel didn’t trust his voice, so he only nodded in gratitude.

“I’ve never forgiven myself for not being there, you know,” Jorick said softly. “When your parents were killed.”

“Neither have I,” Fel said without thinking, and a part of him regretted it instantly. But the larger part knew that it was true. Jorick should have been there to protect his parents or die trying. That had been his job. It was the most important job in the world, and he’d failed.



The palace menagerie was a marvel. Feliandor had heard of such gardens in other places that were little better than dungeons, with bars that ran from floor to ceiling and concrete floors scattered with hay. Not so here. Great care had been taken to re-create the natural environment of each animal. The downside to this was that the animals could hide from view, spending hours at a time hidden in a tree or behind a rock formation. But as a child, with endless hours of free time stretched before him, Feliandor had known great patience. If he waited long enough and remained still and quiet, the animals always revealed themselves to him.

He had no such luxury now, of course. “Which animal appeals most to you?” he asked Jorick. “If it is not within view, I will have the gamekeeper bring it forth.”

Feliandor’s eyes roamed over the exhibits, wondering what his own choice would be. There were kangaroos, of course, with their powerful tails, and the spritely sugar glider, a possum with flaps of

skin that functioned almost like wings. The thylacine was striped and doglike but with a pouch, and the kookaburra was a large bird with a call that sounded eerily like human laughter. The platypus had always seemed ridiculous to Fel, with its bird parts affixed to a mammal's body, and the koala, while adorable, struck him as a particularly useless choice of spirit animal, dozing all day in its eucalyptus tree.

He sighed. How was it that even the animals of Stetriol were less impressive than those of other lands? Where were their lions, their bears?

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Jorick held out a finger. He pointed to a large, fenced enclosure, beyond which Feliandor could see nothing but shrubbery. Yet he knew what animal lived within.

“You're sure?” he asked.

“I am a warrior at heart, my king,” Jorick answered. “There is no better match for me here.”

“Very well,” Feliandor answered, and he felt his pulse quicken. His eyes scanned the plants on the other side of the fence, seeing nothing, and then all at once falling upon the animal, which had been there all along, hidden among the leaves, watching them with what the young king could have sworn was hate.

The cassowary was among the largest birds in the world, but it looked to Feliandor almost like a reptile. It stood six feet tall on two powerful scaled legs and weighed in at nearly two hundred pounds. Its feathers were black and stiff — not at all attractive — and its bare head and neck rose serpentlike from the mass of dirty feathers, bright blue, with two red wattles hanging low. Growing from the top of its head was a cracked, bonelike projection that looked much like the horn of a rhinoceros and ran right into its long, sharp beak.

But its head, while intimidating, was not its most deadly feature. Feliandor looked down to its three-toed feet, like huge lizard claws, which each featured a daggerlike talon on the inner toe. This claw was lethal. It could kill a man in the blink of an eye.

Feliandor had always been terrified of this beast. It had a tendency to stare at him from behind its fence, and the flat, golden eyes set in that absurd blue face always made him feel as if the bird was challenging him somehow. Daring him to release it. He imagined it holding his eyes with its own while it lifted its claw to his vulnerable belly. . . .

“So be it!” he chirped now, pulling his eyes away from the monstrous bird. “A fine choice.”

Feliandor drew the vial from his pocket and considered it for a moment. He felt he should say something, that he should somehow mark the occasion. But words failed him, and in the end he simply handed the vial to Jorick.

Jorick too was silent. He nodded, uncorked the stopper, and held the vial to his lips. His eyes found Feliandor’s. In that moment, the young king almost told him to stop, to reconsider. But Feliandor bit back the protest, remaining quiet. Jorick winked once and downed the contents of the vial.

Fel watched the man’s face carefully. Jorick winced, as if tasting something bitter, but otherwise seemed unaffected. He turned to regard the cassowary.

“Well?” Feliandor said when he could bear the silence no longer.

“I think I’d like to open the gate,” Jorick said.

Feliandor handed him the gamekeeper’s key, then took a step back. He looked on as Jorick walked to the gate, unlocked it, and then opened the door. The cassowary still didn’t move, and Feliandor watched Jorick watch it.

“Well?” he said again.

And then, suddenly, chaos. The bird rushed forward, slamming into the half-open door and sending Jorick sprawling back. It hissed, a sound Feliandor had never heard in all his years of coming here. In two great strides the predator closed the gap between itself and the king, and it leaped, clawed talons outstretched. The king stumbled back, bringing up his arms to cover his face and throat, realizing too late that he’d left his stomach exposed. He closed his eyes . . .

And all was silent and still.

Feliandor opened his eyes and let out a short, sudden sob. The bird was gone. Jorick stood by the fence, holding out his arm, and Fel could see the mark on the captain’s hand, a tattoo in the shape of a cassowary. Its long neck wrapped up and around his forearm like a snake.

“My king, I’m so sorry. Are you well?”

Feliandor was shaken, but he smiled. “You called it to its dormant state?”

“I’ve never known it to happen so soon after the partnership is forged.”

“That’s because the bird is not your partner, Jorick.”

Feliandor’s smile widened. “It is your slave.”



Feliandor watched as Jorick went through a series of exercises. Mere hours after drinking the Bile, he was already demonstrating the benefits of his bond with the bird. He was faster, stronger; the grace of his movements was breathtaking. His sparring technique

had always been impressive, but now he took on a dozen of his best men without missing a beat.

He already seemed to be favoring a two-handed dagger fighting style over the traditional sword technique, as if in imitation of the bird.

It was extraordinary. And it was the solution to all of Feliandor's problems. If he couldn't improve Stetriol for the people, then he could improve the people of Stetriol. Make them stronger and tougher. Empower them. And they would love him for it. Finally they would love him as they had his father.

A soldier burst into the room and dropped immediately to one knee. "Forgive the interruption, my liege, but I thought you should know . . . Salen intends to harm the bird."

Feliandor laughed a short, surprised bark of a laugh. He turned his eyes on the six-foot, blade-clawed predator in the corner. "What, that bird?"

"No, my king," the soldier said. "The sparrow in the throne room. He has taken it."



Feliandor hurried through the twisting hallways of the castle, Jorick and a dozen other guards at his heels.

"Go on!" he told Jorick. "Run ahead! You're faster than any of us now."

He did, tearing off ahead of them and disappearing into the darkness at the end of the hall, the cassowary at his side. Feliandor experienced a momentary sense of unease as he watched them go. He couldn't say why; he simply preferred to have that bird where he could keep an eye on it.

But his unease gave way to fury as he closed the distance to the throne room. That sparrow was his only link to his new benefactor. His only link to the Bile. Without it, he was back where he'd started, and all his plans amounted to nothing.

Feliandor crossed the threshold and almost couldn't believe the scene before him.

There was Salen, on his knees before Jorick. The captain's face showed such rage, he appeared almost inhuman. He stood menacingly above the old man, who seemed to be in shock and gripped his stomach tightly — as blood spread across his tunic.

The cassowary loomed in the background, Salen's blood upon its claws.

“Salen!” Fel cried. He ran into the room and dropped to his knees before his adviser, placing his hands over the old man's own bloodstained fingers, as if he could forcefully fix the tear in the man's gut. Salen's wide eyes found Fel's, but he said nothing.

“Jorick, what's wrong with you? Guards! Get a healer in here immediately.”

Half of the guards who'd accompanied the king into the room turned and left. Jorick seemed to come back to himself, blinking furiously. “My king, I . . . I don't know what came over me. I caught him with the bird. He was going to kill it, and I . . . It felt as if I wasn't in control of my own body. It all happened so quickly.”

Fel gently lowered Salen to the ground, one hand behind the old man's head and the other still over his torn stomach, providing pressure to stanch the flow of blood.

“You old fool,” Fel hissed. “What possessed you?”

“Trying . . . to protect you.” Salen's voice was weak, but his eyes were clear.

“I’m not a child anymore, Salen. I don’t need your protection. And you have no right to make decisions that are mine and mine alone.”

Even now, Fel could feel the anger coming back, threatening to overtake him. He hated to see Salen hurt, but it was his own fault. This had been a betrayal. It had been treason.

“Listen,” Salen whispered. “Listen.” And Fel brought his ear down low. “There is a . . . hunger in you,” Salen said. “It drives you. It could . . . drive you to greatness.” He licked his lips. “But appetite in a king can be a terrible thing.”

The healer arrived then, shooing Fel away. He backed off, watching the man work, feeling numb, trying to wipe the blood from his hands. He almost tripped over the birdcage that lay on the floor. The sparrow flitted about inside, unharmed.

“He’ll live,” the healer said. “But he has an unpleasant few months ahead of him.”

“Let’s get him to his bedchamber, men,” Jorick said.

“No,” said Fel. He bent over and opened the little door in the birdcage, and the sparrow flew free, darting immediately out the window and into the night. “Take him to the dungeon,” Fel said. “With the rest of the traitors.”



Two days later, Feliandor stood upon the beach — not the beach of his native Stetriol, not the beach of his joyful childhood, but a small, misty key in the nearby Hundred Isles. The emissary had called it Nightshade Island.

With the exception of Jorick, he had left his entire entourage behind on the ship. Jorick had rowed the two of them to shore in a

small boat, and he stood now, sheltering the king from the wind coming off the water.

“I think you’ll find what you’re looking for in the forest,” Jorick said, indicating the tree line ahead.

“Right,” said Feliandor. “Well, come on, then.”

“No,” said Jorick. Feliandor turned to look at the captain of the guard. There was a flatness to his voice, and an odd quality to his eyes that Feliandor couldn’t remember seeing before. His pupils were dilated into wide black discs, and the flinty captain’s irises shone oddly yellow in the sun. He had called the cassowary to its active state, and it regarded the king with its equally disconcerting gaze. “You must proceed from here alone.”

Somehow it didn’t even occur to Feliandor to argue. He merely clutched his travel cloak to his chin and stepped forward, leaving Jorick alone with his monstrous bird.

The forest was quiet, eerily so after the noisiness of the sea, which the flora somehow dampened. Mist swirled about his feet. What exactly was he meant to find here?

The answer became clear soon enough as he stepped into a clearing. Ahead, there was a dramatic rustling of tree and brush, as if the forest were beset by powerful winds. One tree snapped near its base and fell to the side with a crash. Fel pivoted on his toes as if to run, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the swaying canopy and the darkness beyond — darkness that appeared to be moving, writhing like the snakes in Griswald’s sack.

But it wasn’t the darkness that was moving. It was fur, black as night. A huge figure emerged from the depths of the forest. Fel had an immediate impression of its size and little else. His brain worked slowly, piecing together the parts his eyes fell upon as they worked their way up, up: the massive gray fist with its knuckles in the dirt, the ropy muscles beneath matted fur, the

cavernous nostrils, and the eyes — eyes that were almost human. Almost.

It was an ape, he realized — a gorilla the size of a castle turret.

And in an instant, Feliandor knew that this was the Great Beast of legend. Kovo.

His breath left his lungs. His hands trembled. And then he did something he'd never done before.

He bowed.

He was on his knees for only a moment before a deep, sonorous voice boomed through the trees — or did it only boom through his head?

“Arise, Feliandor,” said the beast. “I would see you on your feet. For are we not equals?”

Feliandor rose slowly, bringing his head up last of all, raising his eyes to look Kovo in the face. The Great Beast looked ancient, with deep grooves lining his pitch-black features, but his power was unmistakable . . . and humbling.

“Forgive me,” Fel said, “but are we equals? I . . . I never thought to meet —”

“You are among the five most powerful and important humans on the planet,” Kovo said. “I am one of fifteen Great Beasts. By my count, that makes you the rarer and more precious of us two.”

“I . . . If it pleases you, yes.” Feliandor felt like an idiot. He had rested on courtly manners for so long — he had no idea how to act when the rules had fallen away so quickly. And his voice sounded small and weak behind the pounding of his heart.

“It pleases me to please powerful men, my king. And it would please me greatly to ease your burdens.”

“My burdens are . . . are many.”

Kovo's eyes glinted. “Illuminate me.”

Fel took a steadying breath and then cast about for a moment, looking for props. Finally his eyes settled on one of the many rings he wore. He pried the ring loose and held it up before him.

“Stetriol, my home, is like this gold ring.

Rich — beautiful! — all around a circle. But empty on the inside.” He closed one eye to gaze through the ring at the colossal ape.

“We can grow no crops within the boundaries of the mountains. The flatlands cannot support our settlements. So the land all along our fertile coast grows cramped and polluted.” Fel’s hands trembled, but not out of fear. The old anger was coming back, and he let it. Anger emboldened him. It made his voice strong, his bearing majestic. “And what happens if enemy ships were to descend upon us?” he continued. “We’d have our backs to the mountains. What happens if a great wave came from the sea to smash us all upon the rocks? My people have nowhere to go.”

He placed the ring back onto his finger. “It is my job as king to imagine such nightmare scenarios and to invent solutions for them. And I am very good at half my job.”

Kovo made a sound in the back of his throat; it almost sounded like purring. “And the Bile? It would somehow ease your burdens?”

“The Bile?”

“It is why you are here, is it not?”

Feliandor nodded. “There is a song my subjects sing in their taverns. When I first heard it quoted, I thought it was in my honor. ‘The good King Fel.’” Fel’s face pinched up and his gaze dropped to the ground. “They’re saying ‘the good king *fell*.’ My father, the good king, is gone. And now they’re stuck with me.” He grasped for the anger, for the fire in his belly that self-pity threatened to suffocate. “I try so hard,” he seethed, “and I am hated for trying. Hated for the sin of not being my father. So, yes: The Bile is a gift.

It could be a great reward to the faithful. It could make my people harder, better suited to the harsh realities of our land.”

“Perhaps,” Kovo said. “But who decides who is worthy of this gift? You? What if that leads only to further resentment? What if they decided to take the Bile from you?”

“They could try,” Fel growled.

Kovo laughed, and the sound was like thunder. It dashed Fel’s confidence. Here was another situation he was not in control of. What if he had come all this way for nothing?

Then Kovo stepped forward, knuckles first, and Fel’s desperation for the Bile was suddenly the least of his concerns. The Great Beast was near enough to crush Fel with his thumb — perhaps with a sneeze. Kovo’s breath was hot and rank and it filled the space between them, his massive head blocking out the sun entirely.

Fel fought panic, trying to ignore the realization that he had never been in such immediate danger in his entire life. There had been a dozen guards between him and Griswald; here, he was on his own and at Kovo’s mercy.

He held the Great Beast’s eyes.

“Your plight moves me,” said Kovo at last. “It seems altogether unfair. Such a human invention, unfairness. . . . In nature, the strong dominate, the weak fall, and that is that. But in your . . . *society*, up can so readily become down. Tell me: You are among the five most powerful rulers of your world. Why is it that you should have less than one-fifth of the viable land? Simply due to an accident of birth? It seems to me that you are entitled to more. Just a piece of Nilo, a sliver of Zhong . . . And why not? Would that not be more fair, after all?”

Fel nodded. It hadn’t quite occurred to him in those terms. Neither did it occur to him to question or contradict the creature

before him.

“And your land is rich with iron,” Kovo continued. “So rich that your smiths have more than they know what to do with! It seems to me that arming your people would be a natural use for all that iron.”

“My . . . my adviser deemed it unwise to arm the people at a time when they are . . . not content.”

“Oh, my, yes, it would be. But not if they had turned their discontent in a direction of your choosing.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand your meaning.”

Kovo smiled, showing incisors nearly as long as Fel was tall. “In all the animal kingdom, it is chimpanzees who are the most like humans. And I have always been fond of both species. Do you know how much you have in common?”

Fel’s mouth was dry, and he forced himself to swallow. He longed to take a step back, but didn’t dare. “We, no, we have no chimpanzees in Stetriol,” he said, and felt immediately stupid. Kovo would know that already.

The Great Beast moved again, circling around Fel, along the edge of the clearing. Fel turned in place, determined to keep his eyes on the beast.

“Chimpanzees use tools to accomplish tasks. They solve puzzles and live together in communities.” Kovo lifted one massive hand from the ground and gently poked at a nest positioned in the branch of a tree. Baby birds chirped from within.

“And when they do not have enough food,” he continued, “they form a raiding party, invade the land of other chimps, and murder their rivals to expand their territory.”

Fel saw it coming a second before it happened. Kovo closed his hand around the nest, crushing it, silencing the birdsong with a single violent gesture.

The king stumbled back, clenching his teeth together. He feared what might happen if he screamed.

After a long moment, Kovo turned to look at him. “Simple, no?”

Fel’s stomach churned. “You . . . you propose we go to war with our neighbors?”

“War is inevitable in your species, I’m afraid,” Kovo purred. “The question is whether your people will go to war with you — *for* you — or against you. Now, do not look so crestfallen. There is plenty of time to turn things around.”

“My father spoke of war as a great evil.”

“Your father lived in simpler times. That’s not really fair either, if you think about it. He left all of Stetriol’s problems to you. But I come to you now with solutions. Take the land you deserve. Arm your people with iron and steel . . . and this.” Kovo extended the fingers of his other hand, revealing a small vial at the center of his huge black palm.

“Go on,” he said, his eyes glinting again.

Feliandor shuffled forward. He reached out slowly, feeling a great trepidation to be so close to so massive a creature. Somehow Kovo’s human qualities made his inhumanity all the more striking. Kovo acted like a person, spoke like a person . . . but he was something else entirely. And he could crush Fel in his hand as easily as he had crushed those baby birds.

The Bile was worth the risk. Fel took a deep breath, reached forward, and lifted the vial from Kovo’s palm. Kovo smiled, only closing his hand again when Fel had taken three steps back, cradling the vial to his chest the entire time.

“The Bile . . . the bond it brings. It will make me stronger? Faster?”

“The gifts vary from bond to bond. But each bond does bring gifts. And you . . .” Kovo spread his arm out wide. “You have the pick of the litter.”

Suddenly the forest was teeming with life. Birds descended from the canopy to flit about just above Fel’s head. Rodents burrowed up from the dirt at his feet, and beasts great and small stepped, hopped, and crawled forth from the shrubbery all around him.

Feliandor took a moment to process it all. He felt he had lost the thread somewhere — lost track of what, exactly, he hoped to accomplish here.

But that was the problem. Feliandor wasn’t in control — had not been in control in a long, long time. The Bile was the first step toward imposing some order on all the chaos he’d suffered.

He threw his head back and drank.

The Bile tasted bitter. His head swam, his vision blurred. There was a light — where was it coming from? Then the light was gone, and he was on his knees again. Before him was a crocodile.

“Interesting,” Kovo cooed. “I knew this was possible, but it’s never happened before. Normally, using the Bile, you would choose an animal to bond with.” He flashed his teeth. “But for the first time, you, my king, have summoned a true spirit animal.”

Fel was dimly aware of a pressure building in his skull, a headache in bloom. But he could not take his eyes from the crocodile. “You mean — he would have come to me anyway?”

“Yes,” said Kovo. “But your bond is different because of the Bile. Thanks to the Bile, you control him. You’ll be the one in charge. Your spirit animal will do exactly as you please.”

“My spirit animal,” Fel echoed. The crocodile was so beautiful, so huge, all lithe muscle and jagged scales. Three times as long as Fel was tall, it looked as if it had been carved out of mossy

granite, its greens and browns fading into gray and back again. It appeared strong and ancient, weathered but defiant, as if it had been waiting here, for him, forever.

The island itself seemed to disagree. Noises like screams rang out from the jungle, and what little sunlight there was in the clearing began to fade, though dusk would not come for hours. The mist that hung low to the ground billowed away from the crocodile's formidable bulk, as if afraid to touch it. Fel wasn't afraid.

He reached out and touched its scaly hide.

He felt grounded now. He felt powerful. He looked into its dark, ageless eyes and could believe he was looking into the depths of the night sky. The crocodile opened its jaws wide, displaying rows of deadly teeth. It hissed, but Feliandor didn't flinch.

If appetite was terrible in a king, as Salen had said, how to characterize the appetite of such a fearsome toothed creature as this? It looked big and hungry enough to never be satisfied. It looked fierce enough to devour the world.

And in that moment Feliandor thought: *Well. The world has it coming.*

"Arise, Feliandor," Kovo said for the second time. "Arise, my Reptile King."

There was a great crash from nearby in the forest. The gathered animals all scattered, panicking. The crashing became a rustling; huge trees bent and swayed as if no more than grasses in a breeze.

And then a second Great Beast materialized from the darkness. Gerathon, the Great Serpent. Her full length was lost among the trees, but she drew her hooded head up so that it towered above even Kovo. Where the ape was almost human, Gerathon was a creature from nightmares. Her eyes were flat. Her movements

were menacing. There was nothing remotely human in her scaled and fearsome face.

Fel knew that he should be utterly terrified. He knew it, but he didn't feel it.

"We have great plans for you, Feliandor," the monstrous newcomer said. Her forked tongue darted from her mouth as if tasting the air. "The people of Stetriol are going to love the new you."

"No," Feliandor said somberly. "No, I don't think they will." He smiled a wicked smile. "But they will learn to fear me."



Jhi





YIN AND YU

By Billy Merrell

EVERY NIGHT FOR WEEKS, YIN'S LITTLE BROTHER, YU, HAD gotten worse. His mysterious illness had started as a sore throat, but lately the coughs were loud and painful sounding. Enough so that Yin couldn't sleep, afraid for her brother.

A pied starling sat atop his perch in their modest home, a three-bedroom house made of bamboo, clay bricks, and paper. The bird was her spirit animal, Luan, summoned a summer ago. Yin had been the only girl in her village to call a spirit animal in over two years.

Luan was too selfish to be afraid for Yu, but he was kept awake all the same. Every time Yin turned in her bed, the bird would feel the vibration and fly up from his perch, startled. Then he would fluff out his feathers and let out a terrible sound, like a squeaky wagon wheel.

"I'm sorry, Luan," Yin said to the bird, losing her patience. "I can't help it!"

Yin hated Luan as much as she loved him. Starlings were possibly her least favorite bird. Why couldn't she be bonded to a golden pheasant, or a raven, or even a common weaver? Something she could train! Instead she had Luan, who only knew how to complain.

The bird let out another terrible sound. This time, it was because T'ien was hobbling into the room. Something between a bear and a weasel, T'ien was an ancient-looking binturong, a nocturnal animal that crawled around their house at night looking for mice or bugs to eat. T'ien wasn't officially a spirit animal, but he might as well have been. Yin's father had raised T'ien since he was a cub, long before Yin or Yu was born.

Luan puffed up his black and white feathers, but T'ien barely looked up with his cloudy brown eyes. He was on the hunt for something, sniffing the floor. When the binturong slinked into her brother's room, Yin got out of bed. If she wasn't allowed in the room, surely T'ien wasn't either.

She reached to pick up the beast just as it was about to sneak under Yu's bed. She carried T'ien back out the doorway and was about to close the door when she heard her brother call her name.

"Did I wake you?" Yin asked, but Yu shook his head no.

"I can't sleep," he said weakly. The boy was five years old, much younger than Yin, and had always looked up to his big sister. "Will you tell me a story?"

"I only know the one about the storm," she said. "And you've already heard it."

Once, when her brother was little, there was a rainstorm that tore through their village. All night, the wind raced up the mountain they lived on and pulled at their house so that it sounded like the roof was being ripped away, little by little. Yu was scared, and so Yin made up a story about a storm, to make him feel better.

“Please?” Yu begged her. “I’m scared.”

“There was a storm,” Yin began. “And it came and went, and everyone was okay.” She said good night to her brother.

“No,” Yu said. “Really tell it.”

“Okay, you brat,” she said, smiling at the boy with sleepy eyes. She put down T’ien, and the animal scampered away.

“Where should I begin?” she asked him.

“Start in the forest,” Yu said, and Yin nodded. But before she could begin the story, Yu started to cough. At first it was gentle, but soon he was coughing so hard that Yin held a rag to his mouth to stifle the sound. When he had finally finished, a little bit of blood came away with the rag.

Yin screamed when she saw it, and her father and mother came rushing into the room. They hurried to Yu’s bedside and saw the blood too. Yin’s mother picked the boy up in her arms and held him tight to her chest.

“What are you doing in here?” Yin’s father asked. “Do you want to get sick too?” He pulled Yin out of the room.

“I want to help,” she cried.

“You can’t,” he said. Hearing that felt scariest of all.

When her mother came from Yu’s room, the family agreed it was time to bring the boy back to the village healer. It was a warm night, and the healer’s home was only a short journey down the mountain. If they left now, they could reach the healer by sunrise.

“I’m coming too,” Yin insisted, but her father hesitated. Finally he agreed. There wasn’t time to argue.



All together, they traveled through the dark, carrying Yu in a wooden cart. Luan slept nestled at Yu's side, where Yin would have been if she were allowed in the cart. The road was bumpy, but by sunrise they were knocking on the healer's door.

"Who's there?" asked a woman with a blue sash. Her white hair whipped in the breeze when she opened the door. Immediately she saw the sick boy.

"Nothing you sold us has worked," Yin's father said. "He's getting worse every night!"

The woman looked sad. She stared at the boy with a furrowed brow, and then sighed deeply as she looked up at Yin's parents. Yin studied the woman's face for a sign that her brother would be okay, but all she found there was sorrow.

"No cure is certain. I hope you don't blame the medicine."

"We don't," Yin's mother said. "But we don't have much money left either."

The healer waved for Yin's family to enter. All except for Luan.

"No animals, I'm afraid," the woman said. "I'm sorry."

Luan puffed up defiantly, but before Yin had to ask, the starling blazed onto her skin, just above the girl's wrist.

"Thank you," the woman whispered. With a wink, she lifted her robe to show Yin her own mark. Her spirit animal was a red panda, which slept at her ankle. "You can call me Kuan," the woman told the girl. "And her name is Tzu." She pointed to the tattoo.

"Can I offer anyone some tea?" Kuan said, ushering Yin inside.

"Tea?" Yin's father repeated, sounding furious. "We have walked all night to come here. Can you help us heal my son or not?" Yin had never seen him so scared.

Kuan looked at Yin, then back at her parents.

“There is still hope to be had for your son,” Kuan said. “I suggest that we discuss your options in my meditation chamber.” Yin’s parents stood to follow the woman, and so did Yin.

“Why don’t you sit with your brother, dear?” Kuan said, turning back to the girl. “I’m sure he’d like to be with his brave big sister right now.”

Yin looked at her mother and father, who nodded solemnly. But Yin didn’t feel brave. She knew what the healer was doing. She was leaving Yin out of the conversation, denying her the truth. She wanted to help Yu as badly as they did. Why wouldn’t they let her listen?

The three adults passed behind a green curtain, speaking in hushed tones that Yin couldn’t make out.

After they were gone, Yin stood by the cart, watching her brother sleep. He looked frail and thin compared to the boy she knew. She wanted to wake him, but Yin knew better. She began to stare at her own tattoo, wondering if Luan felt as alone as she did, or as helpless.

The girl looked around, to make sure no one was looking. And then she whispered across her skin and summoned Luan. Suddenly the starling leaped from her arm and into the air. Yin didn’t care that she was breaking Kuan’s rules. She needed to know if her brother would be okay.

Sometimes, playing with Luan, Yin believed she could hear more acutely. She hoped with his help she could listen in from behind the curtain.

Luan took a moment to settle, nestling comfortably on her shoulder. Once he did, Yin spoke in a whisper.

“I need to hear what the healer is saying. Do you think you can help?”

Luan trilled conspiratorially in the girl's ear. Yin closed her eyes tightly, trying her best to block out all other thoughts. Fear kept surfacing, though. Yin could feel her hands shaking at her sides. She pressed her palms together hard to still them, and soon found her center.

Suddenly Yin heard what she thought was a loud wind outside, like a storm was coming. But when she opened her eyes, she saw it was nothing more than a breeze. She knew that it was working; she was drawing on Luan's abilities. But she needed to focus.

Yin closed her eyes again, breathing steadily. Soon she could hear even the quietest sounds in the room. A mosquito landed on a teacup, and to Yin it sounded like a load of firewood set on a table. As she opened her eyes, Yin realized that she was able to hear Kuan's voice from the other room, almost as if she were sitting right beside her.

"There are no guarantees," the healer said, her voice grave.

"Even at that price?!" Yin could hear the outrage in her mother's voice.

"It's an expensive cure, but a powerful one. It's the best I have access to, even at my age," the old woman explained.

"And it's our only option?"

"Of course not," she told them. "There are other healers. Some much more powerful than I am."

"But there's no time!" Yin's mother said. "The next closest healer is a six-day journey through the mountains. Isn't that what you told us when we first came to you?"

"That isn't exactly true," the woman said.

"What is this?" Yin's father said, angry again. Yin could hear the trembling in his voice.

"It's true the closest professional healer is quite far," she said. "The closest practicing *human* healer. But legend has it that the

Healthbringer lives in the Great Bamboo Maze that protects us to the south. Her name is Jhi, and she has powers far greater than mine.”

“Why would you wait to tell us this?” Yin’s father said.

“Because Jhi is beyond our reach,” the woman replied. “No one has seen the Great Panda for at least a dozen years. And it’s a fool’s errand, navigating the Great Bamboo Maze. I wouldn’t want to put more of your family in danger.”

Yin knew the maze Kuan spoke of. One of the entrances was only a mile south of their home. Her parents had warned her many times to stay away from it. It was rumored to be haunted, though Yin didn’t believe that. She did believe, however, that plenty of strong men and women had died inside, from starvation or thirst, their bodies eaten by rats and worms — or by the Maze itself.

Yin’s father kept a map of the Maze tucked away in their home. Once, their family had been privy to such important secrets, though Yin doubted the Zhongese military would allow them to keep it now if they knew.

“Tell us more about the Healthbringer,” Yin’s mother asked Kuan. Yin listened the best she could, but out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of red that broke her concentration.

She looked up. The curtain swayed lazily, as if something had just passed through it. A small creature leaped onto a shelf behind her, then into the wagon. It was Kuan’s red panda, Tzu. The animal’s striped tail moved like a cat’s, brushing Yu’s leg and arm as she walked. Tzu yawned wide, and then curled into a ball at the boy’s head and went to sleep.

“Do something!” Yin said to the animal. If Kuan was a healer, maybe her spirit animal was too. “Heal my brother, please.”

Tzu opened one of her shiny black eyes to look at Yin. She quickly closed it again, content to sleep.

Yin wanted to scream. Instead Luan flew up into the air, making his terrible squeaky wheel sound, as if to speak for the girl. Yin's father burst from behind the curtain, startling both Yin and Tzu. Luan continued to fly around the room in a panic, so that Yin's father had to duck to dodge the bird.

"Why can't you behave yourself?" Yin's father yelled.

Kuan walked over to the door and held it open until Luan flew outside.

The healer woke Yu. He tried to sit up, but couldn't. His eyes were crusted and red. Kuan put her hand on the boy's chest as he started coughing. He clenched his jaw between coughs, as if the pain was unbearable. Yu lay back down with a moan, his wet hair stuck to his forehead.

"You have decided, then?" the healer asked Yin's parents. They both nodded, with sorrow in their eyes.



Neither of Yin's parents said a word until they could no longer see Kuan's house.

"What are we going to do?" Yin's mother asked as they climbed the mountain road.

"There's nothing we can do," her father answered. He refused to look at Yin. "I feel horrible about it."

"But what about the cure?" Yin asked. She had heard about a cure.

"It's too expensive," Yin's mother said.

"Besides, it probably won't work," her father added.

"But we have to try!" Yin said.

“We can’t afford it. We’d lose the farm. We’d lose everything.” Yin’s father said it quietly, still refusing to look at her. She could see his bottom lip trembling.

“What about the Sword of Tang?” Yin suggested, but there was no answer from her parents. The ancient sword was the most expensive thing her family owned. In fact, it was priceless.

The sword had been in the family for thousands of years. It carried with it a history of pride and power. Though Yin’s family was poor, there was nobility in their blood. Her father had always said that the sword was proof the family would prosper again. The Sword of Tang had its own destiny. One day it would save the family.

“Maybe this is the Sword of Tang’s destiny!” Yin offered in a pleading voice.

Her father shook his head. “Out of the question.”

“But, Father! How can you be sure?”

“That sword is what gives me my title,” he said. “It’s what ensures that you’ll have a well-born husband one day, and will be taken care of after I’m gone. The Sword of Tang is about the future, Yin, not the present.”

“I don’t want a husband! I want a brother!” Yin screamed. She had wanted to scream all day. Yin and her brother *were* the future of the family. Didn’t that mean that the sword belonged to them?

“When you’re older, you’ll understand,” Yin’s mother said. She placed her hand on Yu’s back, rubbing it gently.

“I understand now,” Yin said, tears filling her eyes. “I want Yu to get better.” Yin’s mother pulled her close and surprised Yin by beginning to cry herself, in deep sobs. They sounded as painful as Yu’s coughing.

Climbing up the mountain road was much harder than traveling down, even in the daylight. By the time their family got home, it

was almost evening again, and they were all exhausted. Yin had hoped that during the long journey her mother and father would realize their mistake and consider buying the cure from healer Kuan.

But when they were finally home, Yin's father sent her to bed early with a tone that left no room for argument. It was clear that he had made up his mind.

They were letting her brother die.



That night, Yin listened with Luan for her parents to go to sleep. They waited until T'ien was on the other side of the house, rooting out mice. Then, when they were sure everything was quiet, Yin rose from her bed and crept out of her room, with Luan balanced on her shoulder.

She snuck into her parents' room, matching her steps to the sounds of her father snoring. She moved slowly to the far side of their bed. There, in the center of a small table, was a long parcel wrapped reverently in layers of fine silk.

With only a single glance at her parents' bed, Yin swept the parcel into her hands and moved as quickly as she dared back across the room. Her every step seemed to creak in the tiny, echoing chamber. Right as she was about to reach the door, Yin's father stirred, letting out a loud, surprised grunt. Yin froze.

I've been caught!

But a moment later, he mumbled something quiet and incomprehensible. Yin heard the bed creak behind her as her father rolled over in his sleep.

She moved swiftly from the room, the Sword of Tang clutched in her hands.

“Do you think we’re doing the right thing?” Yin asked Luan once they were out in the farmyard, under the moon. It felt like she was asking herself. The little bird flapped his white-and-black wings in the grass, and then flew up to perch on the sword’s ancient handle.

Even without being polished, the blade shone in the moonlight.

“Do you remember the way?” Yin asked her spirit animal. Luan flew ahead of the girl, down the mountain road. It was too dark to see clearly, and Yin hadn’t thought to bring a torch. The sword already felt heavy in her arms. She labored under its weight, careful not to trip on the stones in the road.

Yin lost track of time as she walked. She had no sense of how much farther she had to carry the sword in secret. She refused to rest until she absolutely could not take another step. Finally that moment came, and Yin collapsed onto the ground. She sat there in the dark with Luan, listening to the forest.

“Do you ever wish you were without me?” she asked the starling. “Do you wish you’d been bonded to some other girl, with a better life?” She didn’t expect him to answer her, but the bird opened his beak and let out a sweet song. Yin had only heard his screams, his whines, the terrible sounds Luan made to get her attention. She had never heard him sing so splendidly. It filled her heart with hope. She knew she was doing the right thing.

Yin got up and started walking again. She was ready to be brave, even if her parents weren’t.

When Yin arrived at the healer’s village, it was still late. There were many hours left before daybreak. Yin knew it wasn’t safe traveling alone this late at night. She had the sword to protect her, but she was too weak and untrained to wield it properly. If anyone

found the girl alone in the dark, they could easily steal it. Then Yin would have nothing. She had to be careful.

Luan flew ahead of Yin, her brave scout. And yet with every step, Yin felt like she might be walking into a trap. She imagined that she was hearing voices, men and women in the shadows plotting to charge her. She looked behind her, into the dark. No one was there. And yet it sounded like people were running toward her.

When she faced forward, Luan flew back to her. It was starting to rain. First gently, and then all at once. Rainwater filled the streets with mountain mud. Her dress was getting muddier with every step.

It would be obvious to Yin's parents that she'd betrayed them, but it was too late to turn back. She had come too far, and all on her own.

Yin knocked at Kuan's door, and Luan let out an impatient squawk. As they waited, Yin asked Luan to sleep again on her arm. The bird bristled with indignation. He flew to her outstretched arm, but instead of doing as Yin asked, Luan pecked at her skin defiantly.

"Ouch!" Yin cried, startled. "That pinches!"

Luan cried out too, but did as Yin asked, disappearing in a blur of motion.

Kuan opened the door wide, as if she had been expecting the girl all along. In her hand was a large lit candle.

"You're very brave indeed," the healer told Yin.

"I've come to buy Yu's cure," she told the woman, revealing the Sword of Tang. Kuan leaned in with the candle, and the wet sword glimmered like the hungry flame.

"My child," Kuan said, "this sword is much too valuable to trade. I could never accept such a prize as payment."

“But you must,” Yin begged her. “It’s all I have.”

“Your father could not have allowed it,” Kuan said.

“It’s my sword to give, not his,” the girl protested.

Kuan stared at her a long while with steady eyes. Yin had heard about the healer’s gaze, that the woman was a master at intuiting what was inside a person. But Yin was telling the truth, so she stared right back.

“I will sell you my strongest cure,” the woman told Yin, “and will take your sword as payment for it. I will keep it safe for you. Perhaps one day you’ll come back for it. I’ll return it to you then, for a fair price.”

“You are an honorable woman,” Yin said to Kuan. Tzu, the healer’s red panda, climbed up the woman’s arm and perched like a monkey on her shoulder, his striped tail curling behind her neck.

“Not nearly as honorable as you are courageous,” Kuan said, handing Yin a small vial of dark liquid. It coated the glass, thick as blood.

“Thank you!” Yin said, hugging the old woman. “A million times, thank you.”

Kuan frowned at the girl’s delighted face. “What’s in that bottle is a chance, not a miracle,” she warned. “His fever will break by morning, or not at all.”

But it felt like a miracle to Yin. She turned from the door, ready to run home to her brother before morning.

“Be sure to tell your parents what I said,” the healer called behind her. “As long as I am alive, the Sword of Tang will be waiting here for you.”

Yin gripped the vial hard in her fist and ran through the rain, out of the village and up the mountain road. She was no longer scared of robbers, or of tripping on stones. She felt like she herself could fly, spry as her spirit animal, dodging the raindrops. She

would have sung, if she weren't using every breath in her body to get her home.



Yin was soaked to the bone when she arrived home, the vial hot in her hand. She rushed into her brother's room and woke him, her hair still dripping down her face.

"Drink this," she said, uncorking the potion and holding it to the boy's dry lips. "You should be better by breakfast," she told him.

"It smells," Yu said, but he drank Kuan's cure in one gulp. He coughed and then put his hand to his chest, like he felt something working inside. Yin smiled, hoping it was the medicine.

"Sleep now," Yin said to her brother. Yu kissed his sister on her cold cheek. He lay back down and closed his eyes, sniffing but smiling.

Yin watched him for a long time before she changed out of her wet clothes and crept into her warm, dry bed. She considered waking Luan, just to say good night, and to thank him for being such a brave companion. But she fell asleep as soon as the thought crossed her mind.



The next morning, Yin woke to the sound of T'ien snarling. It was a high-pitched sound the binturong usually made when he was hungry. But she soon realized what had really upset T'ien.

Her father was tearing through the house, looking for the Sword of Tang. Yin heard the commotion as teacups fell from the cupboard shelves, breaking on the floor.

“Where is it?!” Yin’s father yelled.

Yin jumped out of bed to check on her brother. Kuan had told her that if the cure worked, Yu’s fever would break by morning. Now the sun was up, and Yu hadn’t coughed for hours.

“How do you feel?” Yin asked, looking down at her brother. He gazed up at her through bleary eyes.

Yu shook his head and frowned, then put his hand up to his throat. He opened his mouth and moved his lips, like he was trying to speak, only no sound came out.

“Your voice is gone?” Yin asked. Her brother nodded. She put her hand to his forehead.

He was burning hot! Yu’s fever was worse than she’d thought possible.

“This can’t be. It has to work!” Yin said. But even as she spoke the words, she knew that she was wrong. Kuan had warned her of this. There were no guarantees.

Yin covered her face and cried quietly, not wanting her parents to hear. She wanted to hide, to run away. It was bad enough that her brother was dying; now Yin had gambled her family’s title away. She’d made things worse. She didn’t know how she could face her father or mother, having disobeyed their wishes. She’d lost the Sword of Tang. She might as well die right there with her brother.

Yu was looking at Yin like he wanted to say something.

“What is it?” Yin asked, hoping he could somehow answer her.

Yu put his hands together, like he was praying. Then he opened them, as if opening a book.

“You want me to tell you a story?” Yin asked, and her brother nodded.

“I walked all night through the rain,” she told Yu. “I don’t want to tell that story. I’m sorry.” But her brother looked so sad. She wondered what it must feel like, not getting to leave his bed, knowing that he might die without taking another step. She pictured Yu walking in the rain with a smile on his face, enjoying every sensation.

“There is a new story I heard,” she told him, and his face lit up. “About a healer they call the Healthbringer. Her name is Jhi. She’s a giant panda, and she lives in a maze made entirely of bamboo.” Yu smiled for the first time in weeks.

Yin heard her father calling for her from outside. She didn’t feel ready to face him. Maybe she wouldn’t ever be. Not until Yu was cured.

Suddenly an idea struck her.

“Do you want to come with me to the Maze?” she asked her brother. “We will go to meet Jhi and ask her to heal you.”

Yu nodded and tried to sit up, but he was too weak. Yin would have to carry him. She tied her dress in a knot and hung it over her shoulder like a sling. She pulled her brother up to her chest and into the sling. She crept from her brother’s room into the main chamber of the house, grateful that her father was now searching for her outside. It didn’t take long for her to find the old family map of the Great Bamboo Maze.

Soon she was running out the door, her father calling after her in the fields.

Yu’s skin felt hot to the touch. He gulped in the fresh air and then immediately started to cough.

“Jhi is going to be so happy to meet you,” Yin told her brother. She hoped that she was right.



The Maze was an incredible thing to behold from the inside. Ancient bamboo stalks stood twice as tall as Yin's house, filling the path in front of the girl with rustling shadows. Almost as soon as Yin had entered, all sound seemed muted against the gentle swaying of the thick stalks and their high, distant leaves.

As they walked, Yin told her brother everything she had heard about Jhi the healer, little as it was, as well as every story she'd been told about the Great Bamboo Maze — which turned out to be quite a few.

Yin had been carrying Yu for a long time, and her legs were already sore. She stopped at a crossroads in the bamboo to check her map. She summoned Luan, who sprang from the girl's skin as if from a cage, only to find himself surrounded by bamboo. He hopped along the dirt path, making his terrible noise.

"We should be here," Yin said, ignoring him and pointing to a pin in the fabric of the map. The bamboo walls were marked with crossed green threads. She'd been careful to keep track of where they were in the Maze.

The starling flew up and surveyed their surroundings from the air. When he landed again, he seemed even more agitated. Luan hopped along the map's edges angrily. He pecked at the fabric, tearing at the edges in tiny bites. Then he pulled some of the green threads until they broke away.

"You're ruining it!" Yin shouted, frantically shooing the bird away with her hands. "Is this because I took too long to summon you?"

Luan had pulled out a whole line of green Xs.

“This is where we are. I’m certain,” Yin said, and the bird nodded.

“You’re so annoying!” she said.

Yin’s back was to a wall of bamboo, but according to the map the wall was very thin. Yin had planned to take the long way around, walking with Yu half a mile or more, simply to turn and walk half a mile back on the other side.

“Do you think I’m small enough to pass through the bamboo?” she said to Luan. If she could manage it, she would save them a mile of walking. When Luan didn’t answer her, she stood up and decided to try.

Yin looked deep into the copse of bamboo. Each stem was thicker than the girl’s arm, but they bent when she shoved them. She pushed until there was a gap between the stems, and then stepped onto one of the reeds. She weighed just enough so that the plants didn’t break, and instead held her there off the ground. She took a step with the other foot. Again, the bamboo supported her.

Suddenly there was a crashing sound, as if the bamboo around her was breaking all at once. Yin leaped back just in time, as the stalks cracked apart. She covered her brother as a few of the poles toppled toward them.

Once it was quiet again, Yin looked into the hole she’d made. Down on the ground, at root level, something was sticking out of the soil. It looked like an animal trap, with jagged metal teeth. Yin’s weight must have triggered the jaws to close. If she hadn’t leaped back, she would have fallen right into the trap.

“I won’t try that again,” she said to Luan.

Yin looked at her brother sleeping soundly despite the crashing of the bamboo. For a second, it looked like he had some color in his cheeks. But Yin realized it was only the sunset, turning everything pink before the evening set in.

Yin wanted to get as deep into the Maze as she could before nightfall. She pressed on, carrying her brother half a mile, to where there was an opening in the wall. Yin took out her map.

“Luan!” she said, finally understanding what the bird had been doing. “You fixed it! The map was wrong, and you fixed it!” She looked to where the Xs had been removed, and there in the dirt were the roots of bamboo shoots that had been torn away.

“Is anything else wrong?” she asked. Luan flew up into the purple sky to survey the bamboo again. When he landed, he looked hard at the stitches. After long consideration, he started to peck at another line of marks. Once those were gone, he pecked at others. Yin started to question the starling’s work again. Either the bird was wrong, or the map was uselessly out of date.

The last of the daylight was disappearing. Soon, Yin couldn’t read the map at all. In her hurry to leave, she hadn’t thought to bring a torch or candle. She sat in the darkness, feeling sorry for herself.

Though Yin couldn’t see the map clearly in the dark, she could still feel the stitches, and where some Xs had been removed.

The Maze is changing, she thought. *Why else would the map be wrong?*

She pictured a team of workers digging up the Maze, moving whole walls of bamboo out, pole by pole. It seemed like an impossible task. Each gap of bamboo removed was as large as a house. It would take a lot of workers to dig all that up.

Yin looked into the night sky. She couldn’t see the moon, but a great many stars twinkled like silver pebbles in a dark lake. She heard a rustling in the high leaves and remembered what she’d heard about the Maze being haunted. Yin closed her eyes tightly and listened, unaided by her spirit animal. The wind made it sound

like there were people all around her in the bamboo, on every side. At least, she hoped it was the wind.

Suddenly something moved next to the girl. It wasn't Luan or her brother, but something else that darted beside her in the shadows. The hair on Yin's neck stood up as she held her breath to listen. This time Luan lent her some of his skill, and together they heard everything.

Tiny feet scampered in the dirt. Mouths gnawed the young shoots across the path. There were rats all around her, nesting in the bamboo. The rodents roved together through the night-dark paths, eating anything they could.

Yu let out an unpleasant moan, and Yin realized one of the filthy animals had nosed its way into the sling with her brother. Luan screeched loudly, and the rat scampered away. Yin pulled her brother tight to her chest and let out a worried gasp. His skin felt like it was on fire.

Every night for many nights, Yu's illness had only gotten worse. Why would Yin think a night in the Great Bamboo Maze would be any different? She stared at the stars, asking them quietly to guide her. Yin had often wished on stars, but not like she did that night. She gazed at them as Luan nestled into her, until it didn't feel like she was talking to stars anymore. The two brightest shone like silver eyes in a dark face, listening to Yin's prayer.

Exhausted from her journey, Yin gave herself over to the sounds of bamboo and the face in the night sky. Slowly, a peace came over her.

In her dreamy state, Yin realized why the Maze was changing.

She imagined a giant panda, as big as a house. She pictured her wandering through the Maze, sitting to snack in the shade. It wouldn't take long for a panda that big to leave a sizable dent in a

bamboo wall. Yin decided that must be why some of the bamboo had disappeared, why the map was no longer correct.

Jhi was here.

Yin smiled at Luan after she thought it. The bird was onto something. If Yin could follow what Jhi had eaten, maybe it would lead her to the Great Panda. Maybe she could save her brother after all.



The next morning, Yu's illness was worse. It was just as Yin had feared. She was certain her brother would not make it through another night. They were out of time. She had to track down Jhi today if there was any hope for Yu.

Luan flew above to scout a path. When he returned, he hopped along the edges of the map as Yin flattened the fabric out. Luan looked serious, his dark eyes scanning the fabric. Suddenly the bird flapped his wings, excited.

“What is it?” Yin asked him. Luan pecked at the cloth, touching one of the green threads several times with his beak before tearing it loose. “That bamboo was there yesterday . . .” the girl said, and the bird nodded his tiny head. Luan then flew up to lead the way.

Yin picked up her brother. He groaned, but Yin couldn't tell if Yu was sleeping or awake. His eyes were barely open, and even his breathing sounded painful.

“You're going to be okay,” Yin promised her brother. Then she hurried to follow Luan's lead, carrying the sick boy as fast as she could through the Maze.

Yin kept the map handy as she walked, occasionally checking to see where Luan had led them. It wasn't long before they were approaching a major crossroads. The girl looked down at the map. Three different paths converged at the one spot ahead of Yin. And beyond it, up one of the paths, was where Jhi had eaten.

Yin began to walk quickly, but then she heard a sound that stopped her in her tracks.

Voices. There was a sound, like someone opening and closing the latch on a box. Yin paused to listen. There were three or four men somewhere in the bamboo. She didn't know what they were working on, but they talked as if they were taking great care.

Yin looked up. She could see the tops of the leaves moving, and not from the wind. One patch of bamboo specifically was shaking. Suddenly there was a clang, and the workers gave relieved sighs, as if they'd finished something very difficult. Or dangerous.

The girl looked again at her map. She could see that the bamboo walls dividing the path were much narrower as they approached the crossroads. The men's voices were coming from the other side of the wall. But what were they doing?

Yin leaned into the bamboo and listened closely. Luan flew back to aid her.

"Jhi has been here," one man said. "This patch. It looks like she's been eating here, doesn't it?"

"How would you know?" another said.

"If she stops to eat here again, she'll have a surprise waiting for her," a third voice said. It sounded like a much younger person, a boy not much older than Yin.

Yin remembered the trap she'd encountered earlier in the Maze. It was deep in the bamboo itself. Maybe these men had put the trap there. But why? To catch Jhi?

All along, Yin had felt like an outsider in the Great Bamboo Maze. She was searching for Jhi, as if the Maze belonged to the Great Beast. But now these men were talking about the panda as if *she* were the outsider. It seemed like they wanted Jhi for some reason.

Yin didn't know what the group of men wanted for sure, but she knew she had to find Jhi before they did. If they caught the panda, there would be no hope for curing Yu.

Suddenly her brother coughed.

Yin whispered for the boy to be quiet. She felt his forehead. Yu was sweating, and yet his lips looked dry and chapped. He coughed again, more loudly. Yin worried the sound would alert the workers.

She listened.

"Whoever it is, we'll get them," the men were saying. She could hear they were already running her way. She looked at the map. There were bends and curves on their side of the bamboo wall. If the map was right, it would take them a while to get to her. Still, she had to hurry.

Yin ran for the crossroads as fast as she could, her brother coughing painfully the whole way. As she burst into the sunlight, it momentarily blinded her. Luan flew straight for the path to where Jhi had eaten, but Yin couldn't see which way he'd taken.

Yin felt someone watching her.

She turned around, and a black boar stepped into the sunlight, peering toward her. It snorted and stomped the ground. The girl began to back away, staring in horror at the boar's sharp tusks and angry eyes.

Suddenly there was a growl so deep it felt like the ground was shaking. The sound made Yin's blood turn cold in her veins. She turned and saw a white-and-green alligator poke its long snout

into the sun behind her. The reptile opened its wide jaws, hissing at the girl.

Each of the beasts would have been a frightening sight on their own. Together, they made Yin wonder if she was in a nightmare: lost in a maze with dangerous predators. Something told her it wasn't a coincidence that both of these animals had come upon her.

Out of the bamboo came three of the men Yin had heard. Only they weren't dressed like workers. They were dressed like warriors, soldiers — but for whose army? Yin didn't recognize their foreign uniforms. These men were not part of Zhong's military. So who were they?

The black boar circled back to a man in a gray cloak. The alligator whipped its tail back and forth, then backed behind a pale man with red hair. The men looked at Yin as if they didn't know what to do with her.

“Don't move,” the red-haired man commanded. Yin froze. Where was Luan when she needed him most? She imagined him watching the scene from a safe perch, high up in the canopy of the bamboo.

Two more men emerged, along with a boy.

“Who is this?” the boy said. Yin recognized his voice from before. He had a spirit animal too. An orange-and-white dhole, as wild-looking as any dog Yin had seen on the mountain. The animal snarled when it saw Yin, gnashing its teeth.

“Grab her,” someone said, and Yin ran. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Luan, flapping his white-and-black wings. She ran toward the bird, down the path he was motioning from.

Yin had never run faster than she did right then, even though she was carrying her small brother, and nearly tripping on the dirt

below her feet. At some point she turned back to look, but none of the animals or soldiers had followed her.

Yin noticed that the bamboo around her was different than she'd seen. Dark and old. She could see spiderwebs in the shadows at the base of the bamboo.

“Luan,” Yin whispered. Her legs were beginning to feel weak and clumsy. “Don't lose me.”

Suddenly the starling flew back to her from ahead. Yin could tell the bird was nervous. The bamboo that formed the Maze was unhealthy looking here; the leaves and stalks were spotted with gray mold. When Yin saw it, she checked the map. She didn't believe Jhi would eat diseased bamboo. Luan flew up high to check their position. Sure enough, they were headed the right way. In fact, the starling eagerly ripped another X from the map. It seemed Jhi had eaten even more bamboo since that morning.

“What would I do without you?” the girl asked her spirit animal. Luan fluffed his feathers and let out a small song. Then, with pride swelling in his chest, he turned to fly ahead again.

As soon as Luan was in the air, though, something pounced. What had looked to Yin like nothing more than a shadow leaped out of the dark bamboo at Luan, pinning the bird to the ground. Yin screamed. It was a bird spider, a tarantula. The hairy arachnid was as big as Yin's head. The spider hadn't bitten Luan, not yet. But why was it waiting?

Out of the far shadows stepped a woman in the same uniform as the men Yin had run from. The woman was old. She didn't look like a soldier, and anyway, Zhong's military didn't allow female warriors. She smiled a devilish smile, revealing rows of black, rotted teeth.

Yin stepped back as the woman approached her. The woman reached down and grabbed Luan with both hands, and as she did

the spider climbed up the woman's arm and neck, into her nest of hair. It perched on the top of the woman's head, fluffing her hair with its eight thick legs.

"Give him back!" Yin demanded.

"The Great Bamboo Maze is no place for children," the woman said, looking down at Yu asleep in the sling. Yin could barely carry her brother anymore. She was so tired. Too tired to run. But she stood straight as she addressed the woman in front of her on the path.

"I need to find the Healthbringer, Jhi," Yin told her. "My brother is sick."

"I can see that," the woman said, a small smile on her face. She checked behind her and over Yin's shoulders before whispering, "I want to help you. Perhaps if you just come with me . . ."

Yin's mouth fell open. She didn't understand.

The woman held Luan out to Yin, but when the girl reached for the bird, the woman grabbed her wrist, right where Luan went when he slept as a tattoo. Soon she was dragging Yin up the path, back toward the men and animals at the crossroads.

"Who are you?" Yin asked the woman, sobbing. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm going to help you," the woman said. "And you are going to help us." Then she snatched Yu's sling from her. Yin cried out in protest, but the old woman was stronger than she appeared, forcing her down. Soon she was carrying the sick child herself and pulling Yin behind her.

They arrived at a ragged camp filled with soldiers like the ones Yin had encountered earlier. Most were just sitting around waiting to be given orders. One of them hailed the old woman, calling her Nao. Strangely, every one of the soldiers appeared to have a spirit animal. Yin had always heard that the Marked were very rare.

The old woman pushed Yin forward, and she fell face-first into the dirt.

“Get this brat to work,” Nao snapped at her fellow soldiers. “There are more traps to be made. I want that oafish panda’s talisman in my hands before the invasion begins.”

“What are you going to do with Jhi once you find her?” Yin asked, wiping dirt from her face, but she received no answer. Instead, one of the soldiers tossed her a uniform like everyone else’s.

“If we find her, can I ask the panda a question?” Yin called after the woman as she walked away with Yu. “*Please!*” she begged.

Nao just ignored her.



Yin was forced to set up traps in the bamboo for the rest of the afternoon, metal jaws that sprang closed when triggered. Since her arms were long and slender, the old woman had insisted the girl would be better at maneuvering around the trigger. But Yin knew it was the most dangerous job. That was why Nao had her do it.

Yin remembered Kuan’s face as she had told Yin she was brave. But the longer she worked, the less brave she felt. The day turned into the early evening, and soon the sky grew dusky.

Yin’s hopes for her brother were dashed. She was certain that he wouldn’t make it another night without Jhi’s healing. Now it was nearly dark, and there was no panda to speak of.

Nao had Yin set one last trap in the dimming light. The girl’s hand shook uncontrollably as she reached in the dark between the trap’s strong jaws and past the metal trigger. She wondered if the

traps could hurt the Great Panda. Yin worried what would happen to her brother if Jhi was killed. Or if she were.

Finished with their work for the night, the soldiers disappeared into their tents. Yin had no tent but didn't care where she slept, so long as she was with Yu, who had been laid in the middle of the camp. Nao returned Luan to Yin before she herself retired, tossing the terrified bird at her. She also gave Yin a half-filled skin of water, barely enough for her and her brother. Yin made sure Yu drank it all, though it stung his throat to swallow.

"I promised you a story, didn't I?" Yin asked the boy once they were alone. It made him smile, as it always had. She wanted to remember her brother smiling.

"There once was a storm," Yin said. "It wasn't anyone's fault. It just happened."

Yu grinned weakly at his big sister. The sight brought tears to her eyes.

"The storm came and swept over the village. It blew shingles off the roofs of houses. It plucked flags from the flagpoles and tore shutters off of windows." Yin watched her brother's eyes twinkle. They were so bright, it looked like the moon was full in the sky. But when Yin looked up, the sky was cloudy.

Usually, when Yin told the story, she said it all with a happy voice. She described the shrill wind and the echoing thunder. She made Yu laugh with how loudly and lively she'd tell it. It wasn't really about the story, it was how she told it to her brother that made him like it.

But Yin was sad that night, and her heart was too heavy to tell it the way he wanted. Yu seemed too tired to care which version she told. He was simply happy to hear her speak.

"A bucket on the porch filled with rainwater," she said. "And then the wind blew all the rain out until the bucket was dry. And

then the storm filled the bucket up again. All night the porch shook and lightning crashed.”

Yin glanced down. It looked like her brother was sleeping. He seemed peaceful, at least. She watched his chest, relieved every time he took a breath, until she couldn't watch anymore, afraid that if she continued, her brother's breathing might stop.

“But in the morning, it was gone,” Yin said. “All the wind and the rain. All the shaking and the echoes and the crashing. And everything in the village was peaceful again. And everyone was okay. Everyone.”

Yin began to cry again. This time, though, her tears weren't those of fear. They were of acceptance. She knew her brother couldn't continue like he had.

“You're so brave,” Yin told her little brother. “Have I said that? I'm so very proud to be your sister.” One last time, Yu smiled. And then he closed his eyes again, as if to sleep.

“Good night,” Yin said. “I love you.”

She lay down on the path, looking up at the cloudy sky. The bamboo swayed high above her, and her vision blurred with each new tear. It was as if new shadows were darkening the highest leaves. But when Yin looked, it wasn't darkness she saw, but light. She saw two silver stars, and remembered them from the night before.

Were they really so bright that they could shine through the clouds? Yin wasn't sure, but she stared into them. She tried so hard to be at peace with her brother dying. But she couldn't be. She wasn't ready. She thought of her parents and how they'd lost everything because of her — their son and daughter and title. Their whole future.

Still, a calm overtook Yin's body, as it had the night before. Suddenly Yin felt like she understood everything around her. She

could hear every soldier in his tent, sleeping or trying to sleep. She could see in the dark, even the ill-lit details of the strangers' camp.

Luan flashed unbidden onto Yin's skin, just above her wrist. Yin felt a power overtake her. It was like when she accessed Luan's gifts, only she knew that wasn't it. She listened deep into the bamboo. She heard the distant rats and closer spiders in their bamboo webs. She didn't feel sore anymore. In fact, she suddenly felt like she had slept for days.

Yin whispered to her brother.

"I'm going to find Jhi," she told him, "and bring her back to you."

Yin didn't know if she would find the panda, but she had to try. Mysteriously, she felt like she could.

She snuck out of camp without waking a single soldier. And then quickly, a plan appeared in her mind. She knew how the traps worked. What if she turned their own traps against them? Yin knew she would have to work quickly and quietly to turn every trap she'd set against the soldiers. But it would be worth it in the morning if the army suddenly found themselves triggering their own weapons.

But could she do it? Yin felt sure that she could. She felt she could do anything right then. It was as if the night had slowed down around her.

Yin approached each trap calmly. They seemed simple now, and somehow she could remember every trap site, even some she didn't help assemble. It was as if they were all written down on a map in her mind.

Yin worked quickly, until she finished resetting the last of the traps. Finally, when she'd finished, Yin closed her eyes to listen. She believed if she listened hard enough, she'd hear the great Jhi

shuffling lazily through the dark. But instead, as she listened, the sounds all muddled together. The clarity she'd found was gone.

Just then, Yin heard a snap, like a stalk of bamboo cracking behind her.

When she turned, she expected to see Nao in her uniform, or another soldier, come to bring her back to the camp. Instead, she saw what looked like a large shadow filling the path. She looked up at the huge creature. A panda, many times the size of any that Yin had ever heard of or seen, sat down with a crunch in front of the girl.

Jhi looked at Yin with curiosity. Silently, the two regarded each other, the huge panda and the little girl. Glittering at Jhi's throat was a silver chain, and on it a carved green figure that shined as if it were lit from within. The panda saw the girl staring at the talisman and covered it quickly with her huge paw.

There was a loud clap and a scream in the distant bamboo. The sound was followed by another. The traps were going off.

"They're coming!" Yin warned Jhi, but the panda didn't look at all worried.

"They want to hurt you!" the girl said. "You have to run!" But Jhi just sat there.

All around them, the soldiers began to appear. First the redheaded man with the alligator, followed by the others. Finally Nao appeared, her spider leaping off her arm toward the girl.

Yin cried out, afraid. But all of a sudden the soldiers were moving slowly, as if they were underwater. Yin looked up at Jhi. The panda didn't seem fazed. One by one the soldiers lay down against the bamboo and fell asleep. Their animals slept too, some disappearing into marks on the soldiers' skin. After a moment, only the tarantula and Nao were left standing, creeping toward Jhi on opposite sides.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Jhi said, her voice full and lovely.

“You can’t,” Nao snarled. The woman feinted left, and as Jhi lifted herself up to follow, the tarantula leaped up and snatched the carved green talisman. Yin could only watch as, in a second, the spider scampered up the panda’s neck, pulling the precious object away from Jhi, chain and all. In an instant, both Nao and the tarantula were gone, running down the path and into the Maze, faster than Yin thought possible. Nao screeched with laughter as the spider trailed behind her.

The Great Panda seemed conflicted. Her sad eyes followed the woman into the dark.

“Why didn’t you stop her?” Yin asked Jhi, knowing the Great Beast had great powers.

The panda turned her attention back to Yin.

“Because you need me more, right now.”

Jhi leaned her enormous head toward Yin, who screamed in surprise at the sight of the beast’s toothy grin. Yin felt a wet, warm surface pass over her palms, and watched in awe as Jhi pulled back, the panda’s giant pink tongue receding back into her mouth.

Yin looked at her palms. They weren’t blistered or sore anymore. *It must have been Jhi’s magic*, she thought. The girl looked up into Jhi’s eyes, big and silver on the panda’s face. The eyes seemed familiar to Yin. Too familiar.

Suddenly the girl understood what she was looking at.

“You’ve been following me!” Yin said to Jhi accusingly. “This whole time, you’ve been watching. That first night, that was you, wasn’t it?”

Jhi blinked silently. The panda’s huge face blocked out the early morning light, so that only her silver eyes shone high above the girl. They looked like silver stars twinkling.

“Who are these soldiers?” Jhi finally asked. Her voice was rich and calm, like a thousand bamboo leaves rustling in the hushed wind. “Who was that woman who took my talisman?”

Yin told the Healthbringer everything she knew: They had set traps and intended to catch Jhi. But as Yin explained it, she remembered her brother, who she’d left at the soldiers’ camp.

“You were with me the whole time?!” Yin asked Jhi again. This time she was angry. “Why did you let my brother get sicker? *Why did you leave him to die?*” Yin pictured her brother now, alone in the camp, his body cold and still.

“How could you?” Yin asked Jhi.

But the panda had other things on her mind.

“I must contact the others,” Jhi said, rising slowly. “Humans are hunting our talismans.”

“Wait,” Yin demanded, but the panda continued, as slow as a glacier in the dark morning.

“I needed you to prove yourself,” Jhi said to the girl. “And you did just that.” But Yin didn’t understand. What had she proven?

“Yin?” A voice echoed in the reeds, barely more than a breeze. Yin’s breath caught in her throat. She recognized that voice.

Yu emerged from the shadows beyond Jhi. He looked dangerously thin from his illness, but the boy could walk and talk. And he was smiling.

“Oh, Yu!” Yin exclaimed, running to hold him. “Thank you, Jhi! Oh, thank you!”

Luan flashed out from Yin’s wrist. At the sight of Yu safe and sound, he began flying in circles around the boy.

The panda didn’t look back at them. Instead, she walked on, deeper into the Great Bamboo Maze.

“Please!” Yin called after her. “Let me repay you, Healthbringer! If there’s any way I can be of use to you, I would

like nothing more than to help you, if I can.”

The panda stopped as she considered the girl’s offer. “There may be something you can do. I think the time will come soon when those with gifts such as yours will be needed. I will take you and your brother home. After a week, I would like you to return to me, if you are willing. There is great trouble ahead. You will hear it more clearly than others. Will you lend me your aid?”

“Anything,” Yin told the legendary animal.

Without another word, Jhi lowered her paw before Yin. The girl stepped on top and was lifted with her brother high onto the Great Panda’s back. And then Jhi continued on her way, carrying both of them to safety, and whispering more warnings of the dangers to come.



Zhong soon fell to a surprise attack from its neighbor, Stetriol — an act that began the first great war with the Devourer. In the years after Feliandor was finally defeated, Yu grew up to become a renowned storyteller. He spent his life recounting the exploits of the green-cloaked heroes who fought to liberate Zhong from the Devourer’s army. But his favorite story was always of his older sister, Yin. Though the armies of Zhong forbade women from fighting, she had wielded the mighty Sword of Tang countless times defending her home. She was the finest spy the green-cloaked resistance had in occupied Zhong, and the bravest woman he’d ever known.



Uraza





THE FIRST GREENCLOAK

By Gavin Brown

VIOLET EYES GLEAMED IN THE DARK. THE ENORMOUS CAT glided under red acacia trees, a shadow outlined by dim moonlight. Uraza sniffed the wind. The scent of prey was on the air. But it was not the antelopes, deer, or wildebeests that she hunted for food. No, this was the ugly scent of men, polluting her hunting grounds with their stink. Filling her peaceful night with their coarse songs and flickering fires. Waddling across her lands with their ungainly two-legged walk.

Uraza was twice the height of a normal leopard, with blinding speed and the ferocity of a tornado. She was not just a normal predator. She was a Great Beast, one of the fifteen who had walked Erdas since the earliest days.

She crested a hill, looking down across the savanna at the small group clustered around a campfire. More foreigners, with their metal helmets and swords, and their destructive habits. The

predators of Nilo had learned to stay clear of her hunting grounds. Only thick, prideful men insisted on straying in. Generally the locals honored her, showing her the respect and admiration due a Great Beast. But even they had become more insolent in recent days.

A delegation of elders from the eastern villages had come last week, begging for her assistance. “Great Uraza, beautiful queen of the savanna,” their leader had entreated her. “Please help us fight these foreigners. They attacked without warning, betraying many years of peace. We need your aid to drive them from Nilo.”

Uraza had snarled at them, chasing them across the river marking the boundary of her hunting grounds. Who did they think she was? One of their village dogs, to be ordered around when they needed her? One of their precious spirit animals, to be forced into a life of cohabitation with them? This was just a conflict between two human tribes. And humans needed to deal with their own problems. Let them appeal to a soft-hearted Great Beast like Ninani, who enjoyed meddling in everyone else’s business.

All Uraza cared about was that none of them entered her hunting grounds. The camp below her had been made in her territory, so those humans would pay. She prowled forward, her keen ears picking up their conversation as she advanced.

“Samilia ordered us to scout out the hunting grounds. I’d rather be ripped up by a giant leopard than come back to her empty-handed,” one of them was saying.

“I heard stories at the last village,” another one answered. “She’s massive and vicious. She doesn’t even let the locals enter. They say she’s so large that she can eat a man in two bites. If we go in there, we’re as good as dead.”

Uraza’s teeth gleamed in the darkness as she smiled. Perhaps that one would be suffered to live, if only to spread tales of her

glory to the rest of the foreigners. The huge cat waited a moment, until the watchman posted at the edge of the firelight looked away. Then she charged forward. He turned back and stared at her in slack-jawed shock as she rocketed into the light of the fire. He went down with one swipe of her claws.

The night erupted in screams and shouts. Some of the soldiers panicked, but others grabbed swords and shields and advanced on her. Uraza simply laughed, a deep rumble booming across the savanna. She leaped at them, extending her claws and batting aside the steel as they swung it. One she raked across the face with her claws, another she sent careening with a thrust from her shoulder.

Uraza crashed through the camp, slashing tents and sending pots and pans falling into the mud.

“Please!” one of the soldiers said, throwing up his hands in surrender as she bore down on him. Uraza leaned in close, able to smell the fear that she saw in his wide eyes. She snarled, using a single claw to draw a cut across his chest.

“Go,” she rumbled at the pathetic man. “Cross the river, and leave my hunting grounds forever. Tell your people that anyone else who enters my borders will end their journey in my belly.”

The man nodded, face completely drained of color.

“Now go!” Uraza roared.

The man fled into the night, immediately followed by his companions. She heard them stumbling through the dark long after she could no longer see them. Uraza kicked a massive clod of dirt onto the fire and slipped back into the night.

Half an hour later, she sniffed the air and growled with satisfaction. The stink of humans no longer clung to the air.



For the next week, Uraza thought that the foreigners had learned their lesson. The sweet smell of distant fires reached her when the breezes blew westward, but no humans violated her borders. Then, on the ninth day, as she stalked a herd of gazelles across the grassy highveld, Uraza's nose once again caught the smell of invaders on the wind. She reluctantly turned from her prey and made her way down to the savanna.

She circled around the group at a distance to get upwind of them, wary of so many. They had crossed the Kwangani River and were already well into her hunting grounds. This was a crowd of humans, but also many other animals. Coyotes, dingoes, wallabies, kangaroos, snakes, and several others. And there was another smell with them — something sour and unnatural. It was nothing that Uraza could recall having encountered before, even with her thousands of years of memory.

She pulled up short as she peered over a small hillock to determine the best route of attack. She caught a slight movement out of the corner of her eye, but pretended not to notice. Instead, she looked over the hill and tensed, as if to charge forward. Then, with no warning, she leaped to the side.

The two figures hiding in the grass were caught by surprise, and Uraza effortlessly brushed aside the green cloak they were hiding under and pinned each of them with one of her front paws. They struggled instinctively, but she gave a low growl and they immediately stopped.

Under her left paw was a vervet monkey, looking up at her sheepishly with its pinched black face and gray fur. But the monkey didn't concern her. Nearly crushed under her right paw

was a boy, still gripping a spear in his right hand. She leaned in close, sniffing him and staring into his eyes.

The boy and the monkey had been hiding under a green cloak the same color as the grasses of the savanna, and the boy was covered from head to toe in mud. Despite herself, Uraza smiled. The mud would have locked in his scent, allowing him to stalk the savanna unobserved, even by humans accompanied by spirit animals with a strong sense of smell.

“What are you doing here?” Uraza demanded quietly. “You wear the goatskin of the Vendani, and know how to hunt the grasslands. So you must know that it is forbidden to trespass on my hunting grounds.”

The boy gulped nervously, but then looked her straight in the eyes. “Yes, I know the laws of the savanna. But they don’t matter now. I’m here to save you.”

Uraza rocked back on her haunches, shaking with laughter. “You’re just a boy with a spear. Perhaps I’ll spare you, since you’re clearly insane. A Great Beast doesn’t need a little kitten like you to help her.”

But the boy looked back calmly. “I’m not a boy. I endured the Nights of Fire and summoned Omika, my spirit animal. I’m a man, a warrior. I’m Tembo of the Vendani — and I’m going to save you, Great Beast or not.”

Uraza pulled her paws back, and the monkey jumped around the boy’s neck, hissing at her. “Very well, little warrior. I know enough of the Vendani — the word means ‘goat thief’ in many languages. How is a goat thief possibly going to save a Great Beast?”

The boy bristled. He looked her in the eye. “The Conquerors below aren’t here to hunt your game. They’re here to hunt you. To capture you and to steal something from you.”

Uraza growled, and the boy's monkey dove to hide behind his back. Tembo himself didn't flinch. "How do you know this?" she asked.

"One year ago, they offered my people a truce, but on the first night after the peace was made, they took us by surprise. They torched our village. They slaughtered our goats, every one of them."

The massive leopard knew what that must have meant to the boy's tribe. The Vendani were goat herders. They ate goat meat, goat milk, and goat cheese. They wore goatskins. Vast herds of goats were their pride, and their wealth. The Vendani were renowned throughout Nilo as fierce warriors who would defend their herds from thieves, jackals, and even lions.

"Most of us surrendered on that day. But I swore that my people would be free. I am part of a small resistance. Three days ago, I snuck into the camp of the men below to steal their supplies. I overheard them bragging that they were coming into your territory to capture you. They hope to find something hidden in your hunting grounds."

Uraza stretched, flexing her muscles. "Human swords and bows are no threat to me."

Tembo shook his head. "They have some sort of weapon that they think will give them an advantage. Give me time to sneak in again and discover their secret, and then we'll beat them together."

Uraza simply laughed at him, sending his monkey scurrying for cover again. "They are arrogant fools. And you are just as much a fool for thinking I need you. Watch me drive them from my lands, and I'll let you go home to tell stories of the ferocity of the Great Cat of the Grasslands."

She expected him to continue begging her not to go, but the boy just gave her a long look, then shrugged. "If you want to fight

alone, I won't stop you."

The cat reached out a paw and pinned him to the ground again, letting her claws come out just enough to press dangerously into Tembo's neck.

"I'm the greatest predator on the continent. Better even than that miserly fool, Cabaro. I don't need your help. I don't care for your kind, and I will have nothing to do with your petty conflicts."

Tembo just raised an eyebrow as the claw dug into his flesh. "Are you trying to convince me, or to convince yourself?"

Uraza pushed him away, sending the young warrior rolling into the tall grass. "Watch," she thundered, and leaped over the hill, then charged down the grass toward the invaders.

In the camp below, there were shouts of alarm. The huge leopard let out a roar that shook the grasslands. Her body flew, legs surging with ancient strength. She was fury in the flesh, and she smashed through the first Conquerors without slowing. She dove into a knot of them, sending humans and spirit animals flying. Swords barely nicked her fur, and arrows felt like tiny pinches. *Let that foolish kitten on the hill watch how a Great Beast protects her territory*, she thought.

The center of the camp was emptied in moments, with most Conquerors fleeing and those who stayed falling easily to her claws. The sour scent was stronger here, and as a woman with an ax charged her, she noticed that its edge was coated with a sticky black substance.

Poison? Uraza smiled, baring her fangs. That was their secret weapon? Humans had tried to poison Great Beasts before. Arsenic, hemlock extract, plagues — it didn't matter. They were the rulers of the wild, and they were immune to poison and sickness. She batted the ax away effortlessly with a paw, and sent the Conqueror reeling with a sweep of her tail.

There were shouts from the grasslands outside of the camp, where the Conquerors were re-forming. Uraza stalked out of the camp to meet them, slashing a few tents and leaving them collapsing behind her as she went.

The foreigners had formed a shield wall, a barrier of tall steel shields bristling with spears. Uraza advanced, and arrows flew from behind the wall. They mostly bounced harmlessly off of her, but occasionally one would dig into her hide. There was a tingle with each puncture, but the sensation was no worse than a slight prick.

She surged forward, trying to push their spears aside with her paws, but there were too many. Uraza leaped to the left, and the Conquerors pivoted in unison, spinning the wall to face her. She jumped back to her right, but they hustled to adjust, keeping the forest of spears pointed at her. She backed up slowly, growling.

Then she charged, paws thundering on the ground as she gained speed. The soldiers ahead of her dug in, lowering their spears and bracing against their shields. More arrows flew at her, buffeting her like a wind of thorns. She grinned, showing them the white of her fangs. She could see their eyes go wide, but the spears stayed pointed straight at her.

Just moments before she reached the spears, Uraza leaped. She launched into the air, sailing high over the shields. Only one of the enemies managed to raise his spear in time, and it raked along her side. She felt a burning as the black substance coating its blade rubbed into the wound.

The leopard landed among the archers, sending them sprawling. With a few slashes from her claws, more Conquerors fell before her. But something was wrong. She leaped backward and felt a strange weakness in her legs. More arrows thudded into

her at close range, each bringing with it a burst of the burning sensation from the black substance.

Uraza backed away slowly, her muscles quivering feverishly. Something was sapping her strength, weakening her with every passing moment. Now the Conquerors advanced, forming a ring with their spears pointing in at her. This was how tribes like the Vendani hunted lions, not a Great Beast like her. This was an insult.

“I am Uraza, undisputed queen of the grasslands,” she bellowed. “You will leave my lands, or I will kill every one of you.”

The leader of the Conquerors motioned, and the circle tightened. She was a tall, imposing woman, with teeth sharpened into points that matched the serpentine crest on her helmet and the lizard curling around her neck. “Be a good kitty, and lie down nice and easy,” she said.

Uraza roared and charged forward, but she was greeted by a cluster of spearpoints and was forced back. The poison-tipped weapons left several new wounds in her coat. She knew that a Great Beast’s body would adapt to this substance, but it would take time. That wouldn’t help her now. Her feline instincts told her that she didn’t have the strength to defeat this many. She turned to run, but they had her surrounded.

As her vision became blurry, the circle tightened. She gave a feeble roar and attempted to charge for the weakest point in the ring, but her legs buckled. The enemy advanced, spears lowered and dripping with the black poison.

She lashed out, but the more weapons pierced her, the more the burning grew, coursing through her legs and making her shoulder muscles spasm. She fell down into the grass, and struggled to

stand again. Her legs refused to respond. She could do nothing but snap her jaws at the humans.

The last thing she saw before a curtain of darkness descended was the Conqueror woman's crocodile grin as she advanced.



The floor shook unsteadily and was decorated with bars of light. Uraza drifted back to consciousness slowly as her body healed itself. She raised her head as her vision cleared, and saw the bars of a cage had cast the pattern on the floor. They were massive — each as thick as one of her forelegs.

She stretched and stood, barely able to extend to her full length in the confines of the cage. She pushed her head against the bars, testing their strength. The cage was held in a massive wagon, pulled by a team of a dozen oxen.

The Conqueror woman walked up alongside the wagon with her spirit animal, a foot-and-a-half-long tuatara lizard that wrapped around her neck. “Ah, the kitty is awake,” she said cheerfully.

Uraza growled. “Who are you? Who would dare to hold a Great Beast against her will?”

The woman smiled, revealing her pointed teeth. “I’m Samilia, the woman who will be queen of Nilo. And I can’t have any competition from you, can I?”

The impertinence of this woman was shocking. Did she not know who she was speaking to? Uraza threw herself against the bars with a snarl. The bars slammed back into her, sending her reeling. The wagon shook only slightly, and the bars were undamaged.

“Oh, don’t bother. I had this cage built especially for a big, nasty kitty like you.”

Uraza clawed at the door to the cage, but succeeded only in leaving tiny scratches in the metal and dulling her claws.

“You’re my ticket to owning all of Nilo, you know,” Samilia continued pleasantly, ignoring Uraza’s increasingly frenzied attempts at escape. “I used to be the leader of a small band of brigands in Zhong. Now the Reptile King has given me an army large enough to conquer this land and pacify it. And all he asks in return is that I deliver your talisman to him. With you out of the way, I’m sure my troops will have no problem scouring your territory to find the little trinket.”

Uraza raged, smashing herself against the bars again. “The people of Nilo will not accept this insult. They will not tolerate you capturing their Great Beast. I *am* Nilo.”

The woman just laughed. “We’ve eaten their livestock, burned their villages, and stolen their crops. And in all that time, you did nothing to help them. They curse you as much as they curse me, if not more. Did you know, at first the prisoners we captured threatened that you would come to their aid?” She shook her head. “But you never did, you bad kitty. So we don’t hear that much anymore.”

Uraza glared at the woman.

“But you don’t have to suffer. You don’t have to be part of this war. Just tell me where your talisman is, and once I have it, I’ll let you go. You see? There’s no reason we can’t be friends.”

Uraza snarled at her and turned away.

“Very well. I’ll just find it myself,” Samilia said with a shrug, then turned to walk to the other end of the caravan.

The wagon rolled along a dusty road, past the wreckage of war. The great cat watched through the bars as they passed

encampments and lines of marching soldiers. As they caught sight of the caged leopard, many cheered. Uraza growled and hissed at them, but that only encouraged them.

They rolled past fields, barren and unsown. Past villages burned and destroyed. Past lines of prisoners, proud warriors who had been forced to surrender by the invading army. She saw the colors of many tribes, universally tattered and weary. Some looked at her with disappointment, some with despair, and some with contempt. Others simply looked past her, eyes dead and defeated.

That night, Uraza's wagon was parked at the edge of a large encampment. They offered her no food or water, not that she would have accepted it anyway. A group of Conquerors stood guard, led by a large bald man with an eye patch.

Slowly, the camp fell silent as the Conquerors finished their meals and went into their tents. The moon rose, flooding the savanna with blue light. Uraza threw back her head and roared her fury into the night.



Uraza tried to pace, nervous energy overcoming her. But there wasn't room even to move the length of her cage, and she had to make do with walking in circles. Her legs quivered impatiently. She should be running through the grasslands, hunting for her next meal. No leopard was meant to be caged, least of all a Great Beast.

It was well after midnight when Uraza turned around to hear shouts at the edge of her camp. Her eyes adjusted in the dark. A human would only have been able to make out vague shapes, but as Uraza's eyes focused, she took in the whole scene.

The Vendani boy she had met just before she was captured was charging across the camp. The Conquerors were drawing their swords, but he was moving too fast. Not quite the speed of a leopard, but close. He was charging straight for her, but what was he doing? Humans. She admired his bravery, but he had the dumb loyalty of a dog, not the cunning of a cat.

The large one-eyed man stepped in the way, drawing a nasty-looking scimitar. Tembo stopped, glancing at Uraza. She turned her nose up and looked away from him.

“Stupid boy. You can’t defeat all of them,” she called out as he faced off with the large man.

Tembo simply grinned at her and raised an eyebrow. Then he threw the spear. It sliced into the large man, who stumbled back. He must not have expected that the boy wearing the green cloak would give up his only weapon. The bald man screamed in pain and fell to the ground.

As the other guards charged, Tembo danced to the side and started running again, back away from camp. A group of the Conquerors charged after the boy. Uraza watched as he reached the top of a hill, pulling away from the pursuit.

Uraza scraped her claws against the bars of the cage in frustration. If this boy thought he could kill an army of Conquerors one by one, he was more of a fool than she thought. Even as his pursuers disappeared on foot into the distance, another group was saddling up horses. A moment later they raced off into the night, urging their horses to go faster.

Uraza lay down in the cage. The Conqueror woman had been right about the Niloans not rising in her defense. And now there was nothing one foolhardy boy could do. Should she have done more to help them? Things had been simpler in the time before humans had spread to every corner of the continent.

The camp was in an uproar. The sound of the injured guard's shouts as another Conqueror removed the spearhead filled the air. Uraza watched out of the corner of her eye as a small shadow detached from one of the tents and dodged through the crowd, making its way to the injured guard. While the bald man screamed, the shadow grabbed something from its belt.

The shadowy figure then zigzagged its way between the legs of the Conqueror soldiers.

Uraza turned to look directly at it. It was the goat thief's monkey, Omika! The creature nimbly dodged past the men and jumped onto the wagon. In her teeth, she held a key ring.

Uraza stood, flexing her muscles. "Open it," she demanded. The monkey squeaked back in reply.

Unseen by the Conquerors, Omika slid the key into the lock, and the cage door swung open. The leopard jumped out of the cage, sending any unfortunate Conquerors who happened to be nearby flying. With a few swats of her paws, she dispatched those who tried to fight her. The rest fled, sprinting for the relative safety of the camp.

Uraza stretched, savoring her freedom. Their poison would be useless now. She would tear this camp apart, and show them the folly of angering a Great Beast.

But the monkey jumped in her way. Omika squealed and tossed a handful of grass at her, then pointed at the savanna.

Uraza growled at the shrill little demon. "The boy. You want me to help him?" He might outrun the Conquerors who had initially chased him, but he would surely be run to ground by the mounted ones who followed.

For a moment she considered simply swallowing the insolent monkey whole, but surprised herself by circling around and changing course. The boy had risked his life to help her escape.

And the Conquerors chasing him deserved her wrath just as much as the ones in the camp.

She turned and loped into the grasslands. Uraza was hunting again.

When Uraza caught up to Tembo, he was at the end of a ravine, in the rocky outcroppings between the grasslands and the veldt. She crept to the edge of the top, looking down on the humans and animals below. He was cornered by a group of armed Conquerors and their animals, mostly dingoes, emus, and other animals from Stetriol.

Tembo had somehow gotten hold of a spear and was backed up against the wall as the Conquerors advanced.

“Just give up, boy, and we won’t hurt you,” one of the Conquerors was saying.

“I’m tempted to make you the same offer,” Tembo answered. “But I don’t have time or patience to escort a bunch of prisoners around. I guess I’ll just have to kill you.” He hefted the spear threateningly.

The Conqueror laughed. “Brave boy, thinks he’s funny. Now he’s going to be a dead boy.”

The soldiers advanced, and Tembo fanned his spear in a wide arc, trying to hold them back. They pushed forward anyway. But as the first Conqueror swung at him, Uraza dropped to the floor of the ravine, laying the lead attacker out with one paw. The others drew back. The giant leopard roared, shaking the ravine with the sound.

“It’s the cat!” one of them yelled.

“Run for it!” another answered.

Within seconds, the Conquerors were running out of the ravine, armor clanking as they slammed into each other in their haste to escape.

“Thanks for the help,” Uraza growled to Tembo in a low voice, then turned to charge after the fleeing enemy.

“Don’t chase them. We don’t have time,” Tembo said.

Uraza turned back to him. “We? You helped me. I just helped you. We’re even.”

Tembo grinned. “Really? I stole you from my rivals. By the laws of the Vendani, you belong to me now.”

“I’m not one of your goats, boy,” Uraza growled, advancing on him.

“If I had done nothing,” Tembo continued, “I would be safely in the grass and you would be in a cage.”

Uraza gave him a hard stare.

“Fine,” Tembo said. “We can argue about how great a friend I am later. I was spying on the Conquerors all day, and I heard their plans. That woman with the filed teeth, Samilia, is leading a force into your hunting grounds. One of the elders told them where your talisman is hidden.”

“None of you know that,” Uraza answered, looking back out into the grasslands. “No human has ever laid eyes on my talisman.”

Tembo shrugged. “So no one knows it’s buried in the Red Orchard?”

Uraza turned back with a roar. “How do you know that?”

“Don’t blame me,” Tembo answered. “I just heard them talking. But we need to go now, in order to stop them. We have a better chance if we work together.”

Uraza simply laughed. “Stay out of my way, little warrior,” she rumbled, then leaped out of the ravine and disappeared into the night.



The giant leopard prowled under ancient red trees. She had been expecting to find soldiers, spirit animals, and tents — but the orchard was deserted. There was no prey here, but their signs and their musky scent were everywhere.

This had been her hunting ground since ancient times, and now it was desecrated. Trees were reduced to splintery stumps, chopped for firewood. Trenches had been dug for latrines, and the grasses were trampled by scores of boots.

Uraza raced through the orchard, heart beating faster with each step. When she reached the tallest tree, where her talisman was buried, she slowed. Someone was there.

She crept forward with the sort of grace that only a Great Cat could command. Then she stopped short.

Somehow, the pip-squeak boy had gotten there first. He stood underneath the branches of her favorite tree, staring at a hole in the ground.

“You!” she hissed. “How are you here?”

The little warrior gave her his obnoxious grin.

“A leopard, a gazelle, a zebra — you all run so fast. But you tire out. A Vendani warrior can run all day and all night, slow and steady. When we hunt, we chase until the prey just can’t run any farther.”

She advanced. “Where is the talisman?”

Tembo gestured at the hole in the ground. “If it was here, the Conquerors have it now. We’ll have to track them down.”

Uraza drew closer, her massive head dwarfing the boy’s small frame. “It’s my talisman, in my hunting grounds. Go fight your battles somewhere else, little warrior.”

Tembo shook his head, seemingly unconcerned with the enormous jaws inches from his face. “Really? What’s your plan, then? Defeat an entire battalion by yourself?”

“I am a hunter. They are prey,” Uraza answered, her voice low and full of menace. “They will regret their theft.”

“Great,” Tembo answered. “And while you’re doing that, I’ll be retrieving your talisman, which will be packed away in an iron wagon behind three locks. I saw it come off the ship last week.

“Don’t worry,” he said as she bared her fangs. “I’ll give it back to you immediately. I just need to make sure they don’t keep it.”

“And how do you expect to do that?”

The boy shrugged. “A goat thief who can pick the lock on a paddock or barn can steal an entire herd in a single night.” He leaned in with a conspiratorial air. “Before the Devourer attacked, my family had the largest herd on the savanna.”

Uraza stared out into the fading light of the evening, where a herd of water buffalo was lazily grazing. Was she really going to accept help from this little human? She sat back on her haunches and sighed.

“Very well. But if you betray me . . .”

“You’ll snack on my entrails? I’ll warn you, I might be a bit stringy,” Tembo answered, nonchalantly leaning in to examine the row of fangs still bared in front of his face.



They tracked the wagon trail through the night and into the next day, Tembo jogging easily alongside the Great Beast’s long strides. Omika perched on the spear warrior’s shoulders,

chattering her wordless encouragement. From the freshness of the tracks and scents, Uraza could tell that they were gaining.

Evening fell as they reached the top of a rise. They found the wagon in a hollow below, empty and abandoned. Tembo knelt as Omika leaped around, poking and prodding.

“They camped here last night,” the boy said. “And they left the wagon behind to move faster. They must have gotten word that we were free and likely hunting them.”

Uraza nodded as she sniffed the ground. “Then they split into four groups, each going a different direction.” She left unspoken the real problem: Even if they separated and she somehow trusted Tembo, they still would have no guarantee of catching up to the talisman.

They examined the tracks in silence for several minutes, while Omika gleefully raided a bag of feed left behind in the wagon.

Tembo stood up, looking into the distance. “They brought the talisman this way.”

Uraza looked at him disdainfully. “How could you possibly know that? Any of these two-legged thieves could be carrying it!”

Tembo clucked at her with a scolding air. “Don’t be so hard on thieves. We’re not all that bad.”

Uraza just snarled irritably, violet eyes flashing.

“Their leader, that woman Samilia,” Tembo said. “I’d bet that she would keep the talisman herself. She has a great lizard for a spirit animal — her men called it a *tuatara* — and this group has a set of lizard tracks next to it. It must be hers.”

Tembo started off following the set of tracks, with Omika trailing along, jabbering at him in her monkey nonsense. Tembo looked at her and nodded, as if he could understand the monkey’s noises. Humans might speak with words, but Uraza had often

thought that the sounds that came out of their mouths were equally meaningless.

As they drew farther away, Uraza looked around the camp. Then, with a noncommittal grunt, she lowered her head and padded along after him.

That night they stopped, and Tembo collected branches and built a small fire.

Uraza sat on her haunches and watched him quizzically as he spun a stick in a pile of tinder.

“That will attract attention,” Uraza said. “If whatever you’re doing to the poor stick actually works at all.”

Tembo nodded. “We’re near the village of Dakami. There’s an old man living there that I befriended after he caught me stealing a baby goat. He’s an ally. He’ll see my signal and call my friends.”

Uraza issued a full-throated noise, something between a growl and a purr. Tembo cast a wary glance in her direction, then quickly looked back at his work. Despite his bluster, Uraza could tell that the little warrior was still nervous around her. As he should be.

She put her head down and watched as the fire caught. Tembo held his cloak over the small blaze, periodically pulling it back to send precisely timed bursts of smoke into the air.

“Why?” she finally asked, when he had stamped out the fire.

“Why what?” He lay down in the grass, nestling into his green cloak.

Uraza gave him a long look, violet eyes glittering in the light of the dying coals. “Why risk your life for my talisman? Why fight against the Conquerors, when there are so many of them, and there’s just a few of you? From what I saw, it looks like you’ve already lost.”

“It’s true, most of my tribe surrendered months ago.” Tembo’s face was still, staring up into the starry sky. “The village elders

negotiated a deal with them, in order to keep us out of the war. But when they came, they destroyed everything anyway. We watched them torch our buildings, slaughter our livestock. My mother had a favorite goat, Maggi, the one that always gave us the most milk, and the best-tasting cheese. That woman, Samilia — she killed it and ate it right in front of us.”

Tembo fell silent for a moment, and Omika nuzzled up against him.

“They didn’t just take our livestock, our wealth. They took our way of life. Our honor. The elders said we couldn’t fight. That they were too strong. But that first night after we surrendered, I stole back Maggi’s last wheel of cheese and gave it to my mother. And I realized there wasn’t anything that special about these Conquerors. The next day, I decided to leave my village. I stole a green cloak from one of their officers, in order to blend in with the grasslands, and fled.”

Uraza watched the boy, wondering at the arrogance that had led him to take on an entire army alone.

“I met in secret with young men and women I knew from other villages and nearby tribes. I heard the stories of what the Conquerors had done, and told them mine. Everywhere I went, I stole the invaders’ supplies, sabotaged their wagons, and always made sure that someone got a glimpse of my cloak, or Omika, so that they would know that it hadn’t been a local who was responsible. It was when they demanded that spirit animals stay in their dormant state that I started to gain allies.”

Tembo’s voice had been tense and angry, but now he swelled with pride. “One night last spring, we all left behind our tribe colors and allegiances and replaced them with green cloaks, so that we could move undetected across the savanna. Everywhere we go, we bring hope that all will be free one day, and knowledge

that the power of these Conquerors is not absolute. And we will fight, and win — with or without our Great Beasts.”

Tembo seemed to be waiting for her to respond, but Uraza let the pause stretch into a long silence, until finally she heard his breathing fall into the steady rhythm of sleep.



The next morning, Uraza loped along the savanna, Tembo jogging easily next to her. Omika, exhausted from the journey, had gone into the dormant state, disappearing into a tattoo on Tembo’s arm. They passed hippos sunning themselves in the Kwangani River, and a flock of sandpipers flew overhead, heading to their breeding grounds for the season. Finally they reached an area where the acacia trees had all been cleared. For a mile, they passed only stumps and discarded branches.

They crested a rise, and Tembo motioned to stay down. They crept forward in the grass and hid behind a large stump. On an even taller hill ahead stood the Conquerors’ camp. It was nearly a small city, and the center was surrounded by a wooden stockade. A central keep had also been constructed of wooden palisades. The tracks they were following led straight toward the camp.

Tembo pointed to a small red flag of a lizard under the black Conqueror banner. “That’s Samilia’s insignia. It means she’s there right now and holding court.”

The Great Beast’s muscles tensed. “I will have her throat in my jaws.”

Tembo shook his head. “There are too many of them. Our only chance is to get in and steal it.”

Uraza glared at him. “Throat. Jaws.”

The little warrior shrugged. “Well . . . I see your point. Perhaps we might be able to fit in a little side mission.” He looked back the way they’d come. “Let’s go meet the rest of the resistance. We’ll need them to pull this off.”

Uraza left reluctantly. She would rather have just charged in and hunted down that Conqueror woman, but Tembo had a point. There was an army in there, and they were dug into their defenses.



That night they met the resistance fighters at the one tree still standing within miles of the enemy fort. It had been burned out by a lightning strike, and was a charred wreck not suitable for building. Several of the smaller ones cowered in the back, wide eyes never leaving her huge, muscled form. Uraza could smell the fear coming from them. Even the most fearsome of them, a man fully an arm taller than the rest, was gripping his ax so tightly it looked like the wood might splinter. He had the tattoos of the Takweso people running down his bare chest, intertwined with a Niloan wild dog tattoo — his spirit animal in a dormant state. From what Uraza knew of the local tribes, the Takweso were ancient rivals of Tembo’s Vendani. But the massive man gave Tembo a crushing hug as he arrived.

“Djantak!” Tembo said as he embraced the man.

“Goat thief!” Djantak answered with affection.

Tembo introduced Uraza to his fellow rebels: Djantak, the big Takweso man with the wild dog spirit animal; Kinwe, a bespectacled little man with an owl who peered down at them from the top of the tree; Jinta, a small, quiet girl with throwing knives and no apparent animal, and several others.

They were a ragged group, many of them a good deal younger than the usual age of Niloan warriors. And they all wore an assortment of green cloaks and capes, from rough cloth to what looked like a woman's decorative scarf wrapped around a little boy.

These human children should have been playing in the streets of villages and helping herd goats and sheep to watering holes, not fighting a desperate resistance for their freedom. How could their village elders have surrendered and left this mess for them to fix?

And yet that was the way of the wild. Often the young matured fast or not at all. This was not Uraza's concern. She hadn't created this situation. "Why do we need so many to sneak in and steal my talisman?" Uraza asked.

"Steal your talisman?" Tembo grinned.

"You're a madman, goat thief," Djantak muttered.

"We're going to do much better than that," Tembo continued. "We're going to burn that place to the ground, and their supplies and weapons along with it."

Djantak pulled back his cloak, revealing a cluster of waterskins. "Lamp oil, saltpeter, and birthwort extract. Liberated from a captured Zhongese caravan," he said. "These could make a blaze from a heated insult."

Jinta gave a menacing grin and held up a chunk of flint. She struck it with one of her daggers, creating a small shower of sparks.

"I'm here for my *talisman*," Uraza growled. Loudly. "Not a supply raid." All the resistance members save Tembo backed away from her nervously, their eyes wide. Djantak raised his ax defensively, then slowly lowered it to his side.

Tembo nodded. "I'm going after your talisman myself. The fire will be the perfect diversion."

The leopard cocked her head at him. “And what is my role supposed to be in all this, little warrior?”

Tembo gave his infuriating grin. “I’m going to ride you in, and then jump from your back to the top of the tower wall. Over a short distance you’re much, much faster than I am — we’ll be in before they can even close the gate.”

Uraza leveled a stare at him, a look that had frozen whole herds of wildebeests in terror. “No human is going to ride me. You need a new plan.”

The two locked gazes for a second, but Uraza was unyielding. If this boy thought he could ride a Great Beast, he was going to find a claw through his throat. “I am the mightiest predator in Nilo, boy. I’m not your beast of burden.”

Tembo looked at her for a long moment, but she stared back with complete resolve. He nodded. “All right. We’ll just have to be stealthy, and hope we can get close before they raise the alarm.”



They struck out just before dawn. During the night, Jinta had used the cover of darkness to sneak up to the camp’s palisade and weaken the stakes in a large section. Uraza crept forward, slinking through the grass alongside the green-cloaked humans. Though many times their size, the Great Leopard was a more than able stalker. When she did not wish to be noticed, eyes simply moved past her. They reached the palisade, and she waited while Tembo and Djantak quietly dislodged the wooden slats. How had she ended up here, reliant on humans to do things for her? She’d

developed a certain fondness for her little warrior, but now a whole crowd of the smelly things surrounded her.

Tembo motioned for silence. They huddled down as a pair of guards passed by on the wall above them. The conversation drifted down in the early morning air.

“She’s pushing us hard,” one of the Conquerors was saying. “The troops are exhausted.”

“But she got the talisman,” the other answered. “The last few tribes in the south are surrendering, and northern Nilo won’t be far behind. She’ll probably go after the lion, Cabaro’s, next.”

Uraza could almost hear the evil grin as the first man spoke. “I can’t wait to burn some of those villages, once they surrender. The look on their faces is just priceless.”

“And then we can finally leave this ugly mudhole behind,” the other answered. Their footsteps began to recede.

Uraza started to growl, and Tembo put his hand on her flank to quiet her. She glared at him, but grew still.

Once the hole was cleared, they each wriggled through and crept from building to building on the other side of the stockade. It was still and calm inside, almost unnaturally peaceful. The rest of Tembo’s warriors spread out and disappeared into the early morning grayness as Tembo, Djantak, and Uraza made their way to the central building.

Djantak peered around the edge of one of the nearby makeshift wooden shelters.

“Guards, little brother. Many guards,” he said to Tembo. “We’ll have to go in from behind.”

They skulked through the outlying huts, making their way to the rear of the main building. It was only a small two-story thing, with rough stockade walls and a shingled roof.

Djantak squatted and Tembo stood on his shoulders, bracing himself against the wall. With a low grunt, Djantak pushed up and Tembo grasped the top of the wall. He pulled himself up to be even with the roof and scrambled onto the shingles.

Once Tembo was safely in, Djantak disappeared into the morning fog.

Uraza backed up, took a few steps, and leaped to the top of the building. She soared through the air, a sleek arrow of predatory instinct. Another beast of her size might have made a crash, but she landed as delicately as a sparrow alighting on a branch.

There was a trapdoor in the roof, which Tembo easily slipped through, but Uraza had to wriggle and push her way in.

The room was bare. Not merely plainly decorated, but completely empty. There were even marks in the floorboards where furniture had stood, but it was now all gone. Tembo crept to the stairs but looked back, shaking his head.

“Nothing there,” he whispered. “It’s been stripped clean.”

Uraza glanced around the empty room, her body tensing. “Samilia knew we were coming. This is a trap.”

As she said it, a bell pealed outside. Tembo ran to the trapdoor and poked his head through it. “They’re pouring out of the buildings,” he yelled down. “Fully armed and armored.”

Uraza flexed her muscles and bared her fangs. “You don’t trap a Great Beast twice. I will destroy them all.”

Tembo laughed. “I like the enthusiasm, but maybe we could try something with a higher chance for *my* survival?”

Uraza glared at him.

“Samilia has the talisman around her neck. I have a plan. I just hope they haven’t caught the rest of our people yet.” Tembo rubbed his arm absently. “As soon as I have the talisman, jump down and show them your claws.”

Uraza said nothing. If he failed, she could still try a more direct approach.

Samilia's voice rang through the building. "Come on, kitty, I don't suppose you'd make this easy? Just surrender and this will all be over. I won't even kill your little goat thief friend."

A smile lit up Tembo's face. "No mention of the others. This should work."

"Very well, little warrior. I'll give you a chance. But if this fails, you're on your own."

Tembo shrugged, gripped his spear, and headed for the door while the leopard returned to the roof to peer down at the enemy.

Tembo was right — they had been prepared for this. A horde of Conquerors was surrounding the building, their armor giving off a dull gleam in the gray light.

"Hold on, I'm coming out!" Tembo's shout came from below.

A moment later, he was facing off with Samilia in front of the building. He looked tiny, standing there with nothing but his spear and green cloak, faced with a wall of swords, shields, and spears. Samilia stepped forward, her smile showing off her unnaturally sharpened teeth. Her lizard curled around her neck, mimicking her reptilian smile.

"Finally ready to surrender, goat thief? I think you'll find my dungeon quite comfortable."

Tembo shrugged casually. "Maybe. Do you have coconuts for Omika there? She likes a cup of coconut juice in the morning and the rest of the fruit for lunch."

Samilia's expression darkened. "Drop your spear and surrender, boy, or I'll take it from your lifeless body." The leopard's sharp violet eyes could see her own talisman dangling on a strip of leather around Samilia's neck, the Amber Leopard practically glowing in the predawn light. The idea that this awful

human shared in Uraza's power by wearing the talisman sent a fresh wave of fury through her. Samilia gripped her sword, which would swing with vicious speed, her movements aided by the hunter's instinct that Uraza's talisman conveyed.

Tembo stuck two fingers to his lips and let out a whistle that pierced the morning air. Then two things happened at once.

First, the stockade shook with the sound of explosions. In four places around the camp, fires suddenly sprouted into the air. Conquerors spun around in confusion, pointing at plumes of smoke at the edges of the stockade.

At the same time, Tembo stuck out his arm. A streak of energy came off of his wrist, and in a burst of light, Omika appeared — right on Samilia's shoulder. It happened in a blink, too fast even for Samilia's talisman-hastened speed. Before the woman could think to react, Omika grabbed the talisman and ripped it from her neck. Uraza was stunned — the ability to control exactly where a spirit animal appeared was not something that she had ever heard of. The two must have spent a long time practicing, to learn this trick.

Omika jumped toward Tembo just as Samilia swung at the monkey with her jagged sword. The woman's arm was fast, but no longer quickened by the power of the talisman. Omika lengthened and burst into light as she moved, and by the time the blade reached the monkey, she was nothing but a streak of energy. Tembo caught the talisman in his left hand while Omika appeared as a tattoo in the dormant state on his right wrist. Tembo raised the talisman in his hand, and Uraza leaped down.

The leopard roared with joy, finally able to strike at the enemy after so many days of pursuit. They had been distracted by the explosions, their neat lines shattered. She easily charged through them as discipline evaporated.

Conquerors went flying, struck by a whirlwind of claws and fangs. For a long minute she let the rage consume her as she pressed her revenge on the mass of enemy soldiers. Uraza purred gleefully as she saw Samilia retreating, guarded by shield-bearing Conqueror soldiers.

It was only when the enemy fell back to re-form that Uraza realized she had lost track of Tembo. She followed his scent through the smoke and found him lying on the far side of the camp, an arrow protruding from his right leg. He had a firm grip on the talisman, but wounded as he was, both were easy targets for the enemy.

The scene was now cast in an orange glow as towering flames lit up the stockade. Buildings in the interior were starting to catch as well, straw roofs going up in smoke first.

Some Conquerors were running, but Samilia had pulled together a large contingent and was forming a shield wall with them. In the firelight, her sharpened teeth gleamed as she ordered her soldiers to prepare themselves. She caught Uraza's eye, and in her gaze was something that surprised the Great Leopard: triumph.

That was when she noticed the lizard. It moved like water, slithering over and past the injured Tembo, carrying away the Amber Leopard talisman as easily as a river abducts a leaf.

Uraza yowled, a sound that shook the whole camp, and lunged for the tuatara. But it was too fast, was already halfway up Samilia's leg by the time Uraza had reached Tembo.

"There are too many," Tembo said, gasping for breath. "And I can barely move. Get your talisman back and run. You can still stop her."

The enemy closed in, a curtain of steel. Behind the line, Samilia cackled in victory. Uraza weighed the odds. Could she defeat them? Her sinews tensed, ready to charge in. One good

blow could scatter them and break the wall. She had reserves of strength untapped, and the body of a Great Beast was an incredibly resilient thing. Uraza glanced at the brave little goat thief, trying to push himself up with one hand, his spear at the ready in the other.

She might win her talisman back, but he was already hurt, and would almost certainly not survive.

“No, little warrior,” she said. “You’re going to live to continue this fight.” She lowered onto her haunches. “Climb on.”

Tembo didn’t wait for her to ask twice, almost jumping onto her back despite his injured leg.

“Hold tight,” Uraza commanded. “And if you tell anyone about this, I’ll eat you and your monkey both.”

She could feel Tembo gripping tightly to her fur. As the shield wall charged, Uraza lunged forward. She crashed through the end of their line, then accelerated down one of the streets. The flames had overtaken most of the stockade wall, including the gate. The heat of the dry season had left this fortification as kindling, ready to burn with the slightest provocation.

She dodged past falling timbers from one building and a Conqueror charging from another. They arrived at the hole that they’d entered through, but it was blocked by fallen logs and smoke.

They were both starting to cough as smoke began to choke the air.

“We need another way out,” Tembo croaked.

“Don’t let go,” Uraza answered, picking up even more speed as she raced across the ground. Finally, with a burst of strength, she leaped into the air. She could feel Tembo clinging tightly to her back as she barely cleared the bottom of the flames, leaving the fur on her feet singed.

Uraza loped across the savanna, leaving the burning stockade to light up the horizon behind her.



They met the others at the lightning tree, where Jinta removed the arrowhead from Tembo's leg while Djantak and the others held him down. A knife heated by flame cleaned his wound. Afterward, the humans sat around the fire, retelling stories of the raid and the various mishaps and near-disasters that had occurred. Though he claimed he would have survived anyway, to hear the others tell it, Djantak had only escaped because a log had fallen on a group of enemies who had him cornered.

Uraza sat out of the ring of firelight, staring into the savanna night. She had lost her talisman. For the humans this was a celebration, but for her, it was as if a part of herself had been torn away in the battle. She watched the moon drift up from the horizon.

The Conquerors would keep coming. She was sure of that. Though they had what they had come for, this "Reptile King" would not stop until the whole continent was under his thumb. The whole world, perhaps. She had seen the marching lines of them while in the cage. There were just too many. Even a Great Beast couldn't kill them all by herself.

"Djantak says I'll be back in working order in a few weeks or so," Tembo said, using a crutch to limp out of the firelight and stand next to the leopard.

"That is good," Uraza answered.

They both remained silent for several minutes, watching a flock of black herons winging across the night sky, on their way to

feed in the salt flats of the Kwangani River delta.

“Thank you,” Tembo finally said. “I don’t know why you did it, but you did. All I can give you now is my gratitude, and the promise that we’ll keep searching for it. Keep fighting.”

Uraza lowered her eyes. Human promises. From this one, maybe that meant something.

“We got a message from our allies in Eura,” he continued. When Uraza cast a curious glance in his direction, he nodded somberly. “People say the young King Feliandor of Stetriol has gone mad, and that he’s aided by Great Beasts as well. These Conquerors aren’t just in Nilo. They’re moving across all of Erdas — and we must fight back wherever we can. There’s a shipment of Conqueror siege weapons coming into Port Tantego next week. If we stop it, the city of Kalindi may be able to hold out through the wet season.”

“Then you’ll be headed there, I suppose,” Uraza said, looking away from Tembo once more. Though she did not show it in front of the human, the news that some of her fellows were helping these plunderers deeply troubled her. She had not felt the presence of her neighbor Kovo recently.

“We’re headed there, you mean,” Tembo answered. “I stole you, so you belong to me. We’ve been over this.”

“I should just eat you now, you insolent boy,” she rumbled.

Tembo shrugged. “What makes you think you could take me in a fight?”

Uraza placed a massive paw on the boy’s chest, letting it sit there so that he could feel its weight. But Tembo just grinned back at her.

“You’re nothing but a handful of kittens,” Uraza said, sprawling out to sleep. “Without me, you’ll get yourselves killed for sure. I don’t think I can give Samilia that satisfaction.”

Tembo smiled as he reached over and scratched the leopard behind the ears. Uraza's claws extended reflexively, but she had to admit, it felt good. She should put a claw through his throat for presuming to do this. But somehow she found herself purring.

He had helped her out of a difficult trap. He had been willing to sacrifice his own life for her Amber Leopard, even when she had turned a blind eye to his people. She could tolerate his impertinence, she supposed. Just this one time.



Briggan





THE PACKLEADER

By Emily Seife

LEAPING OVER A FALLEN LOG, KATALIN CURSED HERSELF again for the carelessness that had landed her in this position. She had been running for almost half an hour, ever since she'd stupidly stumbled right into a Conqueror's camp, attracting his attention.

The Conqueror was big and strong, but she was faster, and she'd been sprinting hard. Was it possible that she'd managed to escape him? She glanced behind her. She couldn't see far through the pouring rain, but she seemed to have lost her pursuer for a moment. If so, there was no point in continuing to stumble through the woods, possibly attracting his attention as she crashed through slippery bramble. Spotting a rocky crag, Katalin ducked underneath it and crouched toward the back of the stone overhang. A moment later, she saw a wave of shadow slip through the rain and then appear beside her.

Shaking the rain out of her eyes, she smiled at the dark form as it rippled up her leg and perched on her shoulder. It was Tero, a sleek black mink and her spirit animal. They had bonded only a

year ago, but already she couldn't imagine life without her quick, sly companion. She nuzzled her cheek into his tiny body, allowing his thick fur to briefly warm the tip of her frozen nose.

Looking down, Katalin realized that her tattered cloak was so dark with rain that it appeared as black as Tero's own fur coat, not the true pine green that she knew it was. If anyone came upon her now, they would never recognize her as one of the resistance. But she was — not just a member of the resistance of Marked people and their spirit animals against the Conquerors and their Reptile King — but one on an important mission that could be crucial to Eura's future. Adelle, one of the leaders of the resistance, had trusted Katalin with this. She had pressed the map into Katalin's hand, looking hard into her eyes, and told her that she had to find Briggan the Wolf, one of the fifteen Great Beasts, and convince him to join their cause.

They needed Briggan if they were to have any chance at all of winning the war. While the resistance was still scattered and untrained, the Conquerors were already organized and battle-hardened. They were led by the Reptile King — no, Katalin reminded herself, they did not use Feliandor's self-proclaimed title. The resistance called him what he truly was: *the Devourer*. For he and his army devoured land and lives. The Devourer was coldly calculating and controlling. Plus, his Conquerors were aided by two of the Great Beasts, the ape and the serpent. When impressing on Katalin the importance of her mission, Adelle had told her that their small movement would stand no chance unless they could get Great Beasts to join them.

Katalin made herself comfortable on the packed dirt, glad for the moment to rest and gather her thoughts. Tero, on the other hand, could never hold still except when sleeping. Getting bored, he leaped off of her shoulder and somersaulted across the dirt,

pausing to snap at invisible bugs and to preen his beautiful coat. Katalin loved watching him move and play. He was always hungry, even when they weren't traveling across hard terrain all day, and he spent every moment of free time hunting. She'd seen him kill everything from flickering little fish to large birds.

When they had first bonded, her hands were always covered in cuts. Tero loved to nibble and used to bite her fingertips whenever she pointed or gestured. She was lucky to have been with the other Marked at that point. They had shown her how to enhance her bond with him, and ways to get him to respect and listen to her. Still, it had taken months until Tero was able to control himself, and even now he would sometimes give a reflexive little snap when she reached out to him. She thought she could read him well enough to recognize a slightly ashamed look that always followed after he forgot himself like that.

Shivering, she closed her eyes. Katalin had nightmares and could rarely get through a full night's sleep, but she'd learned to steal small catnaps, collecting snippets of rest. She was getting close to Briggan, and would need to gather her strength in order to face the Great Wolf. She felt confident that she could find him, even though the Great Beasts were known to be reclusive. She had the map from Adelle, of course. And using her bond with Tero, she could draw upon his hunting skills and become a skilled tracker.

It was what would happen when she found Briggan that she was worried about.

If anyone could turn their ragtag group of rebels into an army of green-cloaked fighters, it was he. Known as the Packleader, Briggan was a Great Beast, physically huge and extremely powerful, but like any regular wolf, he had a strong pack sensibility and never traveled alone. Rumor had it that wherever

Briggan went, he was followed by the Great Pack, a large cabal of ferocious and fiercely loyal canines. The resistance hoped that Briggan would use that same powerful leadership to gather and inspire their disparate members.

Adelle had told Katalin all this before she sent her out on the mission. “You’ll find Briggan in the Granite Hills,” she’d said. “You’ll recognize him when you see him, believe me.” Katalin had nodded — everyone knew that the Great Beasts were enormous, and Briggan was known to have hypnotic cobalt-blue eyes. “He has a powerful presence,” Adelle had continued. “So you’ll need to be respectful, but able to hold your own. It’s that very dominance that makes us need him to join us so badly. If he can use his leadership to guide our resistance and compel others to join us, it could change the tide of the war.”

Change the tide of the war . . . Katalin liked the sound of that, and liked knowing that she could play a role in making it happen.

Still, though Katalin hoped Adelle was right, that the huge wolf would be an ally, he was also a dangerous wild animal, and so was his Great Pack. She wanted to be alert when they came face-to-face for the first time.

Katalin felt a silky touch on her cheek and smiled, thinking it was the tip of Tero’s tail. No matter how much he cavorted, and how far he went on his little hunts, he returned back to her frequently to check in, letting her know he was still there.

Then she felt a sharp piercing sensation on her neck and she sprang up with a shriek, nearly banging her head on the low stone ceiling.

Two tiny glints of light shone from the rock overhang. As Katalin peered closer to make out the thing that bit her, a flurry of wings came at her and beat at her face. Katalin squeezed her eyes shut, but not before she saw that it was a tiny bat — a vampire

bat — and it had a distinctly malevolent look in its beady eyes. Again it lunged at the exposed skin on her neck. She pushed it off with a flick of her arm, but it flapped its wings and quickly swooped up and out of her reach. She could feel small drops of blood moving down her neck, running in rivulets with the rain.

Katalin crouched down on the dirt floor. She tried to keep one eye on the bat as she scanned the rainy woods. It was possible that this was just a confused creature, but why would a nocturnal bat be out during the day? It seemed more likely that it was the spirit animal of the Conqueror who had been pursuing her.

Just then, the bat dove in again, tangling its webbed wings and feet up in Katalin's long hair, and beating at her eyes to disorient her.

With a rush, Tero leaped toward her and landed on her knee. Using it as a springboard, he bounced up onto the top of her head immediately. He swiped at the bat, snapping and clawing furiously. Katalin tried to stay calm, but with a battle being waged in her hair, it was hard to keep from crying out.

But if this bat was the spirit animal of her pursuer, as she thought it was, it was too late for caution — they had already been found.

Then there was a yank — followed by a thud — and Tero landed on the ground with the bat and a chunk of Katalin's hair pinned to the earth beneath him.

“Thanks, Tero,” she said, rubbing the sore spot on her scalp where the hair had been pulled out in the scuffle. “I think.”

He looked up at her, eyes glittering with mischief. She knew Tero was clever, that he had excellent instincts and a deep intelligence — but she wasn't sure he truly understood the seriousness of their situation. Caution didn't seem to be in his

nature. He fed off of risk, and sometimes she could feel herself getting pulled into that dangerous current with him.

“We have to get out of here,” she said sternly. “Now.” She selected a large rock and carefully laid it down on the bat’s wing so that it was pinned and immobilized, but not injured. It might be a Conqueror’s spirit animal, but even so, she couldn’t bring herself to kill it.

Katalin and Tero took off together. She could feel Tero’s nimbleness infusing her body, making it easier for her to jump over rocks and tumble under low-hanging branches. Just as she started to think they’d left the danger behind again, a body came crashing through the leaves ahead, and a man landed right in front of them. He was crouched in a fighting pose, holding a crude club. His dark, bushy eyebrows flared on his brow like two bat wings. Katalin could see the tattoo on his forearm — so he’d retrieved his bat and put the creature into its passive form.

“Hello there, little one,” the man grumbled. “I’ve been trying to catch up with you for quite some time now. And on a rainy day like this one, I’d much rather be back at the camp in front of the fire.”

Katalin shrugged. “The Devourer is lucky to have a soldier as hardy as you.”

The Conqueror swung his club at her head. She reacted quickly, dropping to the ground just in time. Unable to stop the momentum of his swing, the club went crashing into a tree trunk, and it bounced out of his hand. “Mako! Come quick, I found the girl!” he shouted as he scrambled to recover it.

Katalin didn’t wait to hear more. She took off at a sprint. A blind panic pushed her forward, her fear bringing back old memories . . . mixing them together with the present, so that she could hardly tell where she was. Her heart pounded so loudly she

could barely hear anything else. Then Tero bounded up onto her shoulder, and she could feel his cool confidence surging through her, bringing her . . . not calm, but exhilaration. With that, she was able to start paying attention to her surroundings again, to hear with clarity the sounds of the forest: the thudding footsteps behind her, the rain and the wind in the trees — and then another sound, also a wet sound, but heavier. They were near a river.

She glanced at Tero, and his smiling eyes confirmed her instinct.

Swerving to the right, she followed the sound of the river. She picked her way through bushes and brambles, trying to keep her footing in the mud. Then the ground slanted steeply down, and Katalin lost her footing. She skidded down the bank to where the dirt gave way to a stone overhang. The edge of the bank came into view, revealing the water below. She couldn't stop herself, so she dropped down to hands and knees, throwing her body heavily at the earth and coming to a stop just inches from the precipice.

Her knees were scratched and muddy, but at least she hadn't gone careening off the edge. She had a moment to look around and figure out the best way to execute her plan.

All the heavy rain had swollen the river, making it deep and fast. That had its benefits if they decided to jump in and try to swim it — they probably wouldn't land on a rock, or hit their heads on the bottom — but on the other hand, there could be dangerous currents just waiting to drag her under with invisible hands. Still, both Katalin and Tero were excellent swimmers. It was a risk she was willing to take, especially when the danger behind them was even more certain.

Taking a deep breath, Katalin dove into the water, Tero right behind her. The water grabbed them, shockingly cold, and threw

them downstream. The river tumbled them over and over, like dice in a cupped palm.

Back on shore, the leaves shivered and shook. The wet forest closed around the spot where they'd disappeared, holding their secret, as the Conquerors thundered by.



Katalin woke up with a start.

They had passed a deeply unpleasant night. The river had allowed them to disappear and lose the Conquerors, but when they crawled out onto a muddy bank a mile downstream, Katalin and all of her possessions were soaked through. Tero's coat dried quickly, but she spent a miserable night shivering and wet. When the rain stopped in the early hours of the morning, she had finally dropped off to sleep for a little bit. It was a restless sleep, veined with dark dreams.

No matter how hard she tried to lock up her memories, her mind kept circling back to the past, like a prowling animal. In her dream she had been back in her home village.

Her home had been in eastern Eura, the part closest to Zhong. The part closest to the Conquerors. When the Conquerors first swarmed out of Stetriol to begin their invasion, they started by swallowing the continents of Zhong and Nilo. They set their sights on Eura next. They'd started testing the waters, sending advance parties in on raids, to see what the resistance in Eura would be. They knew they wouldn't have the element of surprise that had allowed them to take mighty Zhong, but they suspected that Eura didn't have the organization or the power to resist.

And so Katalin had been harvesting crops with her family when the smell of smoke came creeping over the fields. They'd assumed that someone had been careless — brought a candle into a barn, left a hearth fire going without supervision. . . . All the workers had gone sprinting back into town to help. Fire was a terror, but one they knew. But when they reached town, armed only with buckets, there was more than fire. Wreathed in the smoke were men with swords, men whose mission was to slash and burn and reduce the town to nothing but a charred scar on the earth.

Her dream usually ended there, the shock of discovery shaking her awake. But last night the moment had been prolonged, haunted by howls of despair, full-throated cries of mourning. She thought she'd heard her father's voice, open and bare in a sound she had never heard from him before that day —

But something had awakened her. Had it been something real or imagined? A sound from the physical world or a cry from her nightmares? She crouched warily, squinting into the morning sunlight. Had the Conquerors found her again? But there was none of the hush that came when someone had startled the birds away, and her gut told her that they were not nearby. She relaxed and leaned back onto her bedroll, smoothing her sleep-rumpled hair back into a tight braid.

Her dreams were getting stronger. She'd been having these nightmares ever since her town was destroyed, but now the dreams were becoming more vivid, more realistic, the closer she got to Briggan. Adelle had told her that all the Great Beasts had special powers, and that Briggan — as well as being a pack leader — was often able to help enhance the senses. People even claimed that Briggan could bring visions. Glimpses of the future.

Well, that's not what she was getting, Katalin thought crankily. She'd welcome some vision of the future, some hint of what to expect. But she was being pushed further into her past.

Trying to shake off the lingering feelings from the dream, she looked around, getting her bearings. Her map was soggy, but she'd basically memorized it anyway. The river had deposited her at the base of a small foothill. Beyond that to the north was a flat plain, and then the Granite Hills where Briggan and his pack were believed to make their home.

Katalin decided there was no reason to delay any longer. Right now the Conquerers thought she was just a confused Marked girl who had stupidly stumbled into their path. They wanted to hunt her down, but wouldn't spend long dwelling on her now that she'd lost them. But if they caught on to her mission — to the fact that she'd been sent to find Briggan — they would never let her survive. With Tero as a curled tattoo on her arm, she started hiking north, her boots squelching.

Lost in her thoughts, the time passed quickly. At midday Katalin paused. She had made it over the heavily wooded hill and now her feet were sore. With the sun high and hot in the sky, it seemed like a good time to set up camp and allow her things to finish drying out. She could eat and rest, then she could keep moving again later under the cover of dusk.

She found a small, sunny clearing with room to pitch her tent. Tero sprang from her arm as she bent over to hammer the pegs into the soft earth. She gave him a stern glare that she knew would be lost on him.

“Oh, it's just like you to go passive when there are miles of tough terrain to hike, and to jump out right in time for some playing around.” Tero twined his sleek body around her ankles apologetically. “Yeah, right. I'm sure you feel real bad.”

There was a scampering noise in the trees, and a second later Tero was gone, a dark blur in the dappled shade, darting after whatever squirrel or bird had caught his attention.

“Thanks a lot!” Katalin called after him. “Great teamwork!” Sometimes it did bother her that her spirit animal was so fiercely independent.

She finished pitching the tent, then slung the waterproof food bag over a tree branch and hauled it up out of reach of any interested animals. She spread her clothing and other supplies out to dry. All that done, she pulled a twist of beef jerky out of her pocket and sat happily chewing on it, enjoying the sunshine and listening to the sounds of the forest around her. She could almost believe that the rest of the mission would be smooth sailing from here.

A moment before she heard it, she felt it, like a cold trail of ice water down her spine. Then the sound opened up and enveloped the sky. It was a lonely howl, one blast that froze her blood and sent goose bumps prickling across her skin. There was a long pause, and then the call was answered once, twice, three times. The hills rang with the sound of the wolf cries.

Immediately, Tero was beside her again, the fur on his back standing up in alarm. Katalin’s heart melted at the sight of the tiny mink ready to take on a pack of wolves.

This must be the Great Pack. They were powerful and potentially dangerous, but there was no way to avoid them, not when her aim was to go even deeper into the heart of their territory, to Briggan.

The howls were clearly warnings, though — aimed right at Katalin. *Stay away*, they said. *Turn back*.

Briggan knew she was here.



After resting, Katalin packed her bag and continued her journey. Her path took her meandering downhill for a few hours. As she walked, the sun began setting in the west, lighting up the trees with an orange glow. It was beautiful, but the light reminded Katalin of the flames in her town. . . . She snapped her head back to the present. The valley was opening up below her. This was Briggan's valley. The land was ruled by a wolf — *the* wolf — and his Great Pack. Based on the howls she was now hearing frequently, the wolves roamed freely over this valley and the Granite Hills above.

She could see that the closest part of the valley was already in the shadow of the hill, but the far edge was still shining in the sun. Colorful jays darted around, snatching berries and singing joyfully.

Then she caught sight of something — a small hut.

Katalin hadn't known that anyone lived out here in the northern woods. There were certainly no large cities, not even any towns that she knew of. But she supposed she shouldn't be too surprised that there would be people scattered around, maybe a farmer or a shepherd who liked the solitude.

It felt like it had been forever since she'd talked to another person. Being attacked by a Conqueror didn't seem like it counted as real human interaction. She turned toward the house. She'd check it out, see if there was anyone there who could shelter her for the night, maybe even give her some tips on approaching Briggan. She'd have to be careful, of course. It was unlikely that someone living alone in Eura would be a friend to the Conquerors,

so that didn't worry her. But there were many other forms that a foe could take.

Tero nipped at her shoe, clearly trying to tell her something. She watched as he scampered ahead, ran back, and scampered ahead again. He was watching her eagerly. He reminded her of an arrow strung taut on a bow, ready to speed off the second he was released. She knew exactly what he wanted.

"Okay," she said cautiously. "Go scout it out and let me know if it looks safe." He perked his head up. Before he could spring away she called, "But, Tero — take a look and then come right back. No fooling around." She gave him her sternest look, but the invisible leash had been severed — he was already shooting across the valley toward the hut.

Katalin crept slowly along the edge of the valley, closer but still out of sight. When she felt she was near enough, she sat down with her back against a tree to wait for Tero.

She waited . . . and waited. The sun disappeared behind the hills, and the entire valley was sunk into shadow. She squinted into the dusk, worried. He was supposed to get the lay of the land, then come fetch her or let her know to stay away. So where was he? Had he gotten into trouble? She pictured a maniac shoving Tero in a pot and making mink stew.

After waiting another few minutes, Katalin decided she had to go investigate, no matter what dangers might be in store.

She crept forward, trying to stay hidden in the shadows. The hut was just up ahead, and now she could see that there were a few chickens in a fenced-in yard outside. Tiptoeing even closer, she listened closely but couldn't make out anything besides the quiet clucks of the chickens.

Without Tero, she had trouble feeling the bold courage that she needed to face whoever lived here. She needed him to feed her

with his playful curiosity and to warm her with his soft fur and little nudges. Otherwise, she felt very, very alone. Without her spirit animal, she felt like the girl she was before she'd received her mark, before she'd been welcomed into the resistance. A girl without a home, without a family — without anything except for a fear that took up so much of the space inside her that sometimes she forgot there was anything else.

But now Tero was probably somewhere in this house, maybe needing her, and so she had to summon her own courage, which may or may not exist, from someplace inside.

She gripped her small knife tightly in her fist and crawled over the hard-packed dirt yard to the window of the hut. Trying not to make a sound, she peered up over the windowsill.

In the warm light of the flickering fire, she saw someone bent over, pinning Tero to the ground.

In the second that it took her to jump up and shout “Hey!” in her most intimidating voice, she'd realized that the person was an old woman . . . and she was giving Tero a belly rub.

The mink was lying on his back, totally relaxed. His tongue lolled out of his mouth, while the old woman scratched his belly just the way he liked it. Katalin's first reaction was relief — her second, rage at her tiny betrayer.

Tero's bright eyes flicked up and caught sight of her. An apologetic look spread across his face. The old woman followed his gaze and smiled up at Katalin.

“You must be this little fellow's companion, hey? Well, come inside already.” Katalin could hear the woman's voice through the glass pane. She reluctantly brushed the dirt off her knees, hauled her pack onto her shoulder, and walked around to the front of the house.

As she let herself in, the woman pushed creakily to her feet and welcomed Katalin with a warm embrace. She had short, curly gray hair and smelled like cinnamon. This was not the dangerous enemy Katalin had been anticipating.

“I’m Milena, welcome,” she said. “Can I get you some soup? I don’t have much food prepared — I don’t eat all that much anymore — but I have some good soup here.”

“No, thank you. I’m fine —” Katalin began, but the woman barely stopped to listen.

“Good, good. Let me get that soup heated up and then you’ll have something filling to eat. Looks like you could use a real meal.”

“I —”

“And this is your spirit animal, I take it? Don’t worry, no need to be secretive with me. And anyway, I knew you were coming.” She winked at Katalin.

Meanwhile, Tero was nudging her ankle impatiently, wanting to be forgiven. Katalin pushed him away with the side of her foot, not quite ready to give up her grudge. She’d been so frightened for him, and for no reason at all!

“You’re looking for Briggan?” Milena asked suddenly. She stopped stirring the soup that she’d poured into a big pot, and looked carefully at Katalin.

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“Yes, you’re looking for the Great Wolf. Everything about you is seeking, seeking . . .” Milena popped a finger out of her mouth and licked her lips. “Soup’s ready!”

She pushed Katalin into a chair and slid an enormous bowl in front of her. “You eat, I’ll explain.”

As Katalin spooned the fragrant liquid into her mouth, Tero slunk into her lap and curled up. She didn’t acknowledge

him — but she didn't push him off either.

“You might think I like to talk, but I run out of words quickly. It's just that I haven't seen anyone in a long while, so I have a lot stored up at the moment. I came out here to get away from people. . . . I like the quiet, like being on my own . . . but what I didn't expect was the power that Briggan would have on me. I'm sure you've heard that he can bring visions to those around him?”

Katalin didn't even try to respond, just nodded.

“Well, it's true. Probably more than the rumors would even suggest. Briggan can sharpen the senses. He can give people visions, or insight in their dreams. After I lived here for a while, I tried going back into the world. But I saw too much. It wasn't possible for me to walk around, pretending I couldn't see what was coming — it would be as though you tried to deny one of your own five senses. People thought I was crazy too. The visions of the future that he brings are not fixed — they can be changed — but no one would listen to me, no one would let me help them. So I had to leave. Had to come back here.”

The woman put her wrinkled hand on Katalin's arm. “I'm sure you've felt something in you change as you came closer to the Granite Hills. Don't be afraid. There's a reason that you're seeing whatever you're seeing. Even a peek into the past can be a vision of the future, waiting for you to sort it out.”

Milena seemed to run out of words after that, caught up in something inside her own head. But she made a heaping pile of blankets so that Katalin and Tero could spend the night comfortably. Once they were snuggled together, the old woman stood over them and scattered some fragrant bunches of lavender over and around their bed.

“This will help soothe your sleep,” she said. “One night's peace from the dreaming is all I can offer. After that, you'll have to sort

through your memories, same as the rest of us.”

Katalin couldn't remember ever having a better night's sleep.



The next morning, after their good-byes, Katalin and Tero left the hut and the valley behind and set off on another hard day's hike. This one was mostly uphill, taking them into the edge of the Granite Hills. The terrain grew tougher and the trees began to thin out.

While Adelle had not been able to tell Katalin exactly where Briggan would be, Milena had given her very specific directions. The Great Wolf made the highest hill his base, though there was no guarantee he would be there at any given time.

Milena had also handed the girl a small pouch, packed to the brim with sharp-smelling rosemary. “It's for the memory,” the old woman had said, rubbing some of the leaves between her fingers to release the pungent smell.

Now Katalin headed uphill, hoping for the best, but after a whole day of walking, keeping her eyes peeled for giant paw prints, she hadn't spotted any sign of the Great Wolf. The wolf calls — both barks and howls now — were more frequent. They sounded closer than ever, though the animals kept themselves hidden from her.

That night, after making camp, Katalin opened the bag of rosemary and inhaled the fresh evergreen scent. She didn't quite understand what Milena had meant about memory, but the smell did remind her of happier times. Of meals cooked at home. She fell asleep early and slept deeply that night.

And she had another dream.

Katalin was with her best friend, Lizabeth. It was the Spring Festival, Katalin's favorite holiday. They were holding hands and running through the town, happily taking in all the excitement and decorations. Everywhere, giant blue flags with Briggan's symbol were flying, waving proudly in the wind.

It was local tradition to make strings of popcorn and dip them in sugar or chocolate or butter, and then hang them from the doorways. The treat symbolized birth, the emergence of something sweet from its hard winter shell. And it was tasty too. All the town's children were out, jumping for the dangling strings.

Katalin and Lizabeth ran from doorway to doorway, snacking as they went, and sneaking looks through the windows into the homes, to see who had the biggest feast prepared. There were huge roast turkeys, trays of baked apples, bowls of fresh spring greens and edible flowers. . . .

When Katalin turned back to look at her friend, she saw that Lizabeth had managed to get chocolate all over her face, and Katalin burst into laughter.

But as they ran, the breeze grew from a light touch to something stronger, a howling wind. Katalin didn't notice at first — she was caught up with laughing and teasing her friend — but then Lizabeth pulled at Katalin's arm. Her eyes were big and afraid, and Katalin stopped abruptly. Suddenly all she could hear was the howling wind.

It tore down the flags and ripped the leaves off the trees. The howling grew and grew, swallowing the town —

Katalin snapped awake.

The dream had felt completely real.

The dreams always felt real. Each time, for a moment, she believed she was home. Then something came and tore it away from her, and she remembered who she was now: a girl with no

home, no family, no best friend. Just a growling belly and an important mission. Katalin thought back to what Milena had said — that Briggan brought insight to dreams. That even a dream of the past could be a vision of the future. Great — did that mean that her future held as much destruction as her past?

She sat up and stuck her head outside her tent. And took in the total destruction that had come to her campsite while she slept.

Katalin gasped aloud. It had been utterly ransacked. The bags she'd left on the ground had been torn open, their contents scattered around the clearing in shreds. Her food bags, which she'd hung carefully from tree branches as always, were ripped open. Most of the food was gone, though she could see some scraps on the ground, covered in dirt. Animal prints wove through the destruction.

She glared down at her tattoo; of course Tero had been in his passive state just when she could have used his watchful eyes on her campsite.

It dawned on Katalin that she herself was unharmed. Her tent was untouched, and so was a circle of dirt about three feet in diameter all around it. There was something very deliberate about the damage — this was not just some hungry raccoon.

She leaped into a crouch and scanned the edges of the clearing.

There in the shadows, she could see the dark outline of an animal — a wolf. The creature's hackles were raised. It let out a low growl that sent vibrations through her bones.

“Hey!” she shouted, leaping toward it, not pausing to think about what she was doing.

Like a flash, it turned and bounded away through the woods.

It was gone, and so were all of her supplies.

The only thing left behind was the message. A clear warning from the wolves, and from Briggan himself. *Stay away.*

But that was not a message Katalin could afford to heed.



The farther they walked in the Granite Hills, the more frequent the howls and barks of the wolves became. Tero stayed close to Katalin now. He didn't show fear, but she could tell he was wary, uncomfortable. Of course his natural instinct would be to get away from this place filled with wolves.

One afternoon they were forging a path up a rocky hillside when Katalin heard a whining sound. She turned to see if Tero had heard it as well, and he was already frozen, ears perked. With his sharp hearing, he'd have heard it well before she did.

"Should we go check it out?" she whispered to Tero.

He darted along beside her as she made her way closer. It sounded like some kind of animal was in pain. Then she froze.

Voices. Human voices.

"He doesn't look that tough," a man's voice said.

"Not now, he doesn't," a woman answered. "But he will soon enough."

The animal let out a series of scared yips.

Katalin peered around the trunk of a thick tree. She could see a wolf caught in a trap. He didn't seem to be injured, just stuck.

Around him, at a safe distance, were two men and a woman. One of the men inched forward toward the wolf, then gave it a sharp kick. The wolf bared its teeth and tried to lunge at the man, but he quickly skipped back out of its reach. The movement only made the ropes that held the wolf tighten further. The animal yipped again, a mix of fright and outrage.

The wolves had been tormenting Katalin — scaring her and destroying her campsite — so that at times it felt like they were her enemies, instead of the pack of the Great Beast she was trying to convince to join their cause. But no matter how angry she felt at them, she never wanted *this*.

She could only make out small glimpses of the people between the trees, but one of them, the man who had just kicked the wolf, looked familiar. He glanced up, and she caught a better glimpse of him. Yes, it was definitely him — the Conqueror with the bat spirit animal that she'd escaped from a few days earlier. And now that she knew to look for it, she spotted his bat too, circling the sky above his head. She'd have to be very careful. The bat's keen hearing and higher perspective might give them away.

Katalin noticed another animal in the clearing — a fox. The animal was pacing back and forth in the grass. There was something about its face that looked unusual. It had the same alert look that many spirit animals had, but there was something darker in it too. She couldn't tell at first whether it belonged to the woman or the other man.

The man with the bat stepped forward, toward the trapped wolf. "He'll make a good spirit animal for you, Mako," he said to the second man. "The Bile will bind him to you, so that he'll have to do whatever you say. You'll be able to send him to the passive form at any time. And when he's not passive — he'll be fierce. You can see it in his eyes."

Katalin couldn't make out anything in the wolf's white-ringed eyes except for a desperate fear. What was this Bile that the man mentioned?

The other man, Mako, looked slightly younger and sounded nervous as he spoke. "The Bile will make it so that he'll have to

obey, even though he's one of Briggan's own, one of the Great Pack?"

"That's the whole *point* of this," the woman said exasperatedly. "If we wanted just any wolf for your spirit animal, there are plenty we could have used. Why do you think we're still here? Briggan's Silver Wolf talisman is with the army, already halfway back to the Reptile King by now, and yet we stayed behind."

"It wasn't so that you could back out now, I'll tell ya that," the man with the bat muttered, in the same peevish voice that Katalin remembered.

"Hush, Ugron," the woman hissed. She crouched down, beckoning the fox toward her, and it trotted over immediately. So it was hers, Katalin realized. There was something eerie about the way it obeyed her. Something very different from the loyalty that Tero showed her.

The woman spoke coldly. "Wolves can't normally be summoned as spirit animals, so putting one of Briggan's own into the thrall of a so-called *Conqueror* will send a strong message to him. When the 'Packleader' can't even control his own pack, he'll think twice before coming after his missing talisman, like Uraza and Jhi did."

"It'll be a message to *all* the Great Beasts, that they better not mess with us!" Mako exclaimed.

"Yes, that's what I said," the woman answered disdainfully. She extended a long arm that was covered in scars. Even from her remove, Katalin could see the raised pink marks all over the woman's skin. She'd clearly been in more than her fair share of fights. With a brief flash of light, the fox leaped up, becoming a red ring around the woman's upper arm.

Katalin's mind was racing. The Reptile King was the man that she and the rest of their Marked resistance called the Devourer. He

was the leader of the Conquerors, the one who had led his army through Zhong, through Nilo, and up into the edges of Eura. He was the one who gave the order to have her village sacked and burned.

And the curious thing about the Devourer's army was that all of them had spirit animals. No one Katalin had spoken to knew how this was possible. Their resistance was a small and scattered group *because* so few people ever summoned a spirit animal, and not all of those could be convinced to rise up against the Conquerors. So how had the Reptile King, from the relatively small continent of Stetriol, called forth a whole massive army of the Marked? Did the Bile have something to do with this? Katalin looked with renewed attention at the group huddled around the wolf.

"Now, are you ready to do this?"

"Yes," the young man said immediately. Then he hesitated. "Does it hurt?"

"You're a soldier," Ugron said. He spat on the ground. "Or at least, you've been passing for one."

"The taste makes our army rations seem like a treat," the woman said. "But I wouldn't peg you for someone with a discerning palate. Drink up!" She pulled a bottle out of a pouch at her waist and handed it to Mako. He held it up to the sky. In the light, the liquid looked murky and almost oily. Thick currents moved slowly through it.

Katalin couldn't let this happen. She touched the knife that she kept on her belt. It was sharp and could be deadly, but she knew she, Tero, and a knife were no match for three armed soldiers and two spirit animals.

Mako uncorked the bottle and sniffed gingerly at the liquid inside.

“This really smells bad,” he complained, pushing the cork back in. “It smells like old garbage” — he wrinkled his brow, thinking hard, and then continued — “mixed with older garbage.”

Katalin exchanged looks with Tero. He was ready for action too. She could feel his eagerness. They didn’t have time to waste on coming up with a plan. Any second now, Mako would gather his courage and drink the Bile — and Katalin didn’t want to see what would happen after that.

She placed her hand on Tero’s back. With his velvety coat under her fingertips, she could feel the electric energy that zipped through him. Her anger at the treatment of the wolf focused into a thin line of energy that felt almost like joy. It was like a spear of fire that burned out any fear and doubt, and cracked her heart open into a feeling that was exhilaration and speed all at once.

That was when she realized they were moving, dashing side by side toward the clearing.

Tero headed straight toward Mako. With her senses clear and keen, Katalin could make a split-second decision about her own plan of attack, while noticing that the little mink was leaping, claws outstretched, at the bottle Mako held in his hands. Just as Tero made contact with the bottle of Bile, sending it flying out of Mako’s hands and spinning away onto the ground, Katalin went into a slide aimed right at the legs of the scarred woman. Katalin took her right off her feet, and the woman came toppling down with a hard thud. Luckily, her fox was still in the passive state for the moment, and she was flustered enough not to be able to call him up right away.

Katalin froze for a moment, hand on her knife — it was wartime, but she had never harmed a human before. To her great relief, the woman was ignoring her, scrambling toward the bottle of Bile that was rolling away. With Mako, Tero, and the woman all

lunging toward the bottle, Katalin took her chance. She dodged the large man as he came at her, using her speed and nimbleness to somersault right under him and toward the wolf.

It was yipping furiously now. Katalin was afraid to draw too close to it — its understandable rage at humans might well spill over to her right now — but she had to take the risk. She whipped her knife out and started sawing at the rope that bound its feet together. Her knife was sharp, but the rope was thick.

With a flash of perception, she could sense Ugron's hulking shape charging at her from behind, and spun around into a low crouch, her knife aimed up at him. He had his club in his hand, and it was poised to swing at her. Her knife would be useless. Katalin was sure it was all over for her. Then she became aware of a flurry of movement above her — the stupid bat!

Tapping into Tero's hunting instincts, she snatched the bat out of the air and clutched it to her chest, the knife tip pressed up against its tiny body.

"Stop right there," Katalin said, her voice somehow steady despite the potent rush of fear and excitement that filled her veins.

The man froze, his club in midair.

"Put down the club. If you even begin to swing that at me, I will slice your bat right open."

"Come on, little girl, let him go. You're outnumbered. You don't want to mess with us. Give up, and we'll have mercy on you and your skunk."

Katalin pressed her knife harder into the bat. It let out a pitiful squeak. She could feel its heart thudding against her palm.

"Okay, okay!" The man slowly put his club down on the ground and nudged it away with his toe.

"Farther!" Katalin grunted.

He kicked it away.

Katalin circled around the wolf so that she could keep the man in her sights, and attempted to go back to sawing through the rope while keeping the bat pinned against her. But the second her knife was off its body and on the rope, the bat started squirming and biting at her hand.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Ugron hovering, torn between attacking her and playing it safe. Behind him, Tero was ducking and diving, a blur of movement. He was dodging the woman, her now-active fox, and Mako, and playing the ultimate game of keep-away with the Bile.

The wolf craned its neck back at her, snapping its jaws. Katalin gave the rope one last slash, and the constraints fell away. The wolf leaped up — for a split second Katalin was sure it was going to attack her — but then it simply shook out its fur, like a wet dog. It gave Katalin a gentle snarl and bounded away into the woods without a second look.

Her mission accomplished, Katalin lost her euphoric rush. She realized with a sinking feeling that she'd gotten herself into a terrible situation. They were outnumbered, and these Conquerors likely now knew she was a member of the Marked resistance. She was doomed.

As though he could read the realization in her face, Ugron took that moment to hurl himself at her, knocking her knife from her hand, then slamming her to the ground. She felt her back hit the earth with a sickening crack, and fingers of pain wrapped themselves around her. She looked frantically for Tero, craning her neck around Ugron's heavy bulk.

Now that the wolf was gone, Tero had stopped trying to keep the Bile out of the Conquerors' grasp, but he was in grave trouble himself. The mink was halfway up a tree, but the Conqueror's fox had Tero's tail between its teeth, and was shaking him down.

While he struggled, the woman approached with a burlap sack and scooped it over Tero, capturing him inside and tying it up with a tight knot.

“Well, that was a surprise,” she said. Katalin could hear that she was trying to play it cool, but she was nearly breathless after the chase. “See what happens when you muck around, letting your fear hold you back, Mako? Things get messy.”

Mako picked up the bottle of Bile and swung it back and forth. “Yeah, okay, I see. I’ll drink it now.”

“No, you fool,” she snapped at him. “Now? There’s no wolf now. You want to bond with a squirrel?”

“Calm down,” Ugron said. “It’ll be easy enough to capture another one of those mangy overgrown dogs. First we dispose of this green-cloak girl and her pet rat. Then we capture another one of Briggan’s wolves and get this thing over with. We’re not going back to the Reptile King until we’ve finished this.”

He reached for the ropes that had bound the wolf, and easily tied Katalin’s hands behind her back so that she could barely move.

“I’ll do it,” the woman said. She stalked over to a scabbard at the edge of the clearing and pulled out a long, gleaming sword. Katalin squirmed, but she couldn’t free her hands. She tried to tap into her bond with Tero. More than ever before, she needed some of his clever thinking, his impulsiveness. She needed courage.

But she could feel nothing from him except for a mounting claustrophobia. Across the clearing, she could see his thrashing as he squirmed his small body against the sack.

“Head up, girl,” the woman said, approaching with the sword. “Make it easier on yourself.”

A prickling feeling raced up Katalin’s spine. She thought it was fear, but then the now-familiar sound followed — the distant

howling of a wolf. The proud, somber noise seemed to summon up some final bit of nerve in Katalin. She lifted her chin defiantly. She had saved one of Briggan's own wolves from these horrible Conquerors, and if she had to lose her life to them, well, she would show them the bravery of the resistance.

But then there was another answering howl, this one closer.

And another.

Suddenly the hill was echoing with howls, so that the sound became endless and swirling.

A pack of wolves burst into the clearing — maybe fifty or sixty, perhaps even a hundred. Katalin thought she saw coyotes and jackals and foxes too; she couldn't keep track of them all, though her eye was immediately drawn to the animal at the front. There was the wolf she had freed. She could recognize the white patches circling its eyes, and the look it gave her. It was not thanks, exactly, but the look of a proud creature repaying a debt.

Katalin stumbled back as the wolves tore at the Conquerors, a blur of gray and white fur. She felt a tug, and turned. One of the smaller wolves had the rope in its teeth and was yanking it off her hands. With a painful burn, the rough rope slid free. "Thank you," she gasped, already running away toward the sack that held Tero.

The wolf pack had so surrounded the three Conquerors that Katalin could barely see them through the flash of fangs and fur. She looked away, unable to stomach the scene, and unknotted the bag. She pulled Tero out gently. He immediately leaped onto his familiar place on her shoulder. She ran her hands over his body, checking for wounds, and sprinted toward the trees.

There, as massive and unmoving as a granite wall, was a huge wolf. He stood nearly as high as a house, and was looking down at her with eyes the color of sapphires.

Briggan.

“Normally,” he said, in a voice that rumbled like a rock rolling down a hill, “normally, I would not allow a person to get this close to me.”

For once, Tero was holding completely still. He was plastered low on her shoulder and staring up at the Great Beast in awe.

“Normally,” Briggan continued, “I would flatten you with visions, make it so that you were unable to see the road in front of you for the dreams that would wrap themselves around your eyes.

“Normally, I would have my pack chase you from these hills before you had taken another step. Or I would have sent a landslide rumbling down, crushing your camp, so that you would have to retreat.

“But you put your own life on the line for one of my pack. I heard what you did, that you rescued him from a destiny worse than death, from a terrible bondage. And that you did so with no thought of repayment.”

Katalin gave a tiny nod. She remembered Adelle’s words, that she had to maintain her own courage and strength in the face of Briggan’s enormous presence, so she spoke up. “Yes . . . sir. I did. With Tero’s help.” She inclined her chin toward the unusually meek mink.

“So then tell me,” Briggan said, lowering his massive head down to her level. “What are you doing here? Why have you come all the way through the forest, across my valley, and into the Granite Hills, where no humans live?”

“I’ve come because we need you. Conquerors, people like the three who were trying to harm one of your pack, have come from Stetriol under the leadership of a terrible man called the Devourer. They have conquered Zhong, conquered Nilo . . . and soon they will conquer Eura, if you don’t help us.

“I belong to a resistance of Marked people. Nearly all of us have bonded with a spirit animal. We wear green cloaks to distinguish ourselves from the enemy. But our forces are spread out, unorganized, and afraid. We need you to inspire and unite us. . . .”

As Katalin continued with her explanation of all the troubles in the world, she tried to read the expression in Briggan’s great eyes. But he stayed as still and unreadable as a statue. Eventually she came to the end of her story. She had told him everything she knew of the Conquerors’ activities, all the information that Adelle had coached her to say clearly and powerfully.

Briggan lowered his lids and bared his fangs in a terrible angry grimace.

It took all the courage Katalin had to stay standing in front of him when she wanted to turn and run. As she summoned it up, she could feel it — it was her own courage she was pulling on, not just Tero’s — her own pride and defiance, her own burning wish for justice. In the face of the Great Wolf’s sharp smile, each tooth like a spear, she stood tall.

“Thank you for seeking me out, Marked one,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “These . . . *Conquerors* were not the first. Many of them passed through here recently. They stole something precious to me and escaped with it before I could hunt them all down. Only these three were foolish enough to stay. But I have one more question for you.”

“Anything,” Katalin said.

“Why you? Why are you here? Do you care so much about the fate of the world? Of politics, and Great Beasts, and wars that play themselves out on distant stages?”

She shook her head. “Briggan . . . Briggan, sir,” she stuttered. “There is nothing distant about it.”

“Tell me, what kinds of things have you seen in your mind since coming to my lands?” he asked her in a voice more gentle than any that she’d yet heard.

“My dreams are haunted by the same memories as always,” Katalin answered. “I see my village burn again and again. I see my family . . .” She couldn’t bring herself to say any more.

“You know, don’t you, that I bring visions? I can help people catch a glimpse of their path. Of a *possible* path, of course. We always have the power to make change. I trust that you have seen clearly. If we allow the Conquerors to continue, there will only be more of what you’ve seen — more war. More burning.”

She inhaled sharply. “We?”

“We,” he said, his hackles rising. “I will help your Marked resistance in your ragged cloaks. I will form them into an army. The Greencloaks.”

Briggan arched his neck back and let out a howl, a sound as big and powerful as the ocean. All around the mountain, echoing howls answered back — Briggan’s pack, responding to his call.



Essix





FALL OF THE FOUR

By Brandon Mull

SOARING THROUGH A CLEAR BLUE SKY, ESSIX USED THE AIR currents to her advantage. The wind slid across her great feathers as she banked through an updraft to gain altitude in search of a stronger tailwind. Ahead, a forest spread out before her, a sea of green textures. Behind her raged the fiercest battle ever to stain the fields of Erdas.

The corpses of men and animals were piling up. Before the day was through, the tally would reach into the hundreds of thousands. In her mind, Essix could still see bodies torn by tooth and claw, pierced by shaft and blade.

She, Briggan, Uraza, and Jhi were all needed at the battlefield. Led by the Greencloaks, the four embattled nations of Erdas had united in a desperate offensive against the Conquerors. If the gamble worked, the Devourer would fall, along with Kovo and Gerathon. If not, the ever-growing army of Conquerors would sweep across the continents of Erdas, bringing the entire world under one domineering rule.

The three earthbound Great Beasts needed more time to reach the meeting place, so after they departed, Essix had lingered as long as she could, tearing into the Conquerors with her talons and helping the Greencloak armies adjust as the enemy commanders repositioned their forces. The warriors who had followed her to Stetriol, man and beast, needed her there for courage, for guidance, for protection. The Greencloaks would never have mustered the support necessary to mount this attack without her, Briggan, Uraza, and Jhi.

Now, in their hour of greatest need, she was leaving these armies behind. The Greencloak generals understood the reasons, and had communicated to their soldiers that their patron beasts were not abandoning them. Still, Essix had sensed the despair that fell over the Greencloaks as the Great Beasts withdrew from the battlefield.

Essix had almost stayed. The others could make her arguments on her behalf. She had no love of gatherings. But the appeals would not carry the same weight as they would coming from her. Like it or not, Essix knew how to read her fellow guardians better than anyone, and that could provide a meaningful advantage when persuasion was required.

In this dire hour, Tellun had finally summoned a Grand Council. If all the Great Beasts would stand together against the madness of Kovo and Gerathon, the outcome of the battle would be much more certain. This meeting was too vital to miss.

Below her, in the distance, the clearing came into view. Much of Stetriol was desolate waste or jagged red mountains. Only Tellun could have created such an idyllic forest on so harsh a continent in such a brief time. Stately trees surrounded a flat meadow where tall grass rippled in the breeze. A shallow stream

meandered across the clearing, its bed a treasure trove of polished pebbles. A few bulky boulders added character.

The other beasts were there — all except Kovo and Gerathon, who had predictably shunned the proceedings, and Mulop, who would participate from afar. The octopus preferred not to travel, which freed the others to gather in noncoastal locations.

Trimming her wings, Essix plunged toward the meadow, the exhilarating speed focusing her thoughts. Until now, as a whole, the Great Beasts had chosen neutrality in the worldwide war. They had not met in a Grand Council since the early days, when Kovo and Gerathon appeared less directly involved and the Devourer was just beginning to reveal his unquenchable lust for world domination. This would be the last chance to gain meaningful assistance against the Conquerors. It would be no small task to steer this headstrong group toward war.

Essix alighted on a fallen log an instant before the sun reached its zenith — the appointed starting time. Her claws gripped the decaying wood much as a lesser falcon would cling to a branch.

“Cutting it close, are we not?” Cabaro remarked, stretching his golden form and extending his claws. As a physical specimen, none of the Great Beasts could quite match the lion. If he were not so arrogant and disinterested, he might have been their leader. None could rival him in battle. But he seldom roused himself to action, content instead to pursue a life of lordly leisure. Why hunt when he could feast on the spoils of the lionesses? Why fight when intimidation sufficed?

“I did not want to leave the battle,” Essix said. “The free nations are hard-pressed. The fate of Erdas may well be determined before the sun sets.”

“Does this mean we will be hurried?” said the enormous Dinesh, who looked more like a wrinkly gray hill than an

elephant. “I did not cross the Deep to dash through a hasty conversation.”

“The day you dash is the day I fly,” laughed Suka. Sitting casually, huge paws in her lap, the polar bear looked to be in a playful mood. When she wasn’t, all of Erdas needed to beware.

Essix resisted a laugh. Briggan, Rumfuss, and Uraza showed less restraint. Draped in silks, shaded by an embroidered canopy, the elephant looked like the exact opposite of haste.

“I came farther than anyone,” Suka continued, “but a quick council suits me just fine.”

“Fools mock,” Dinesh said in a voice like the first tremors of an earthquake. “A Grand Council is no minor occasion. A certain dignity must be maintained.”

A movement off to one side caught Essix’s eye. She swiveled to see that a kangaroo had wandered into the clearing. All of the Great Beasts turned to regard the accidental visitor. The unfortunate kangaroo watched with paralyzed anxiety from the edge of the meadow. The poor creature knew it had made a fatal mistake. Essix could sense its heart rate accelerating.

The relative size of the kangaroo emphasized the enormity of the Great Beasts. Though fully grown and not a small specimen, the kangaroo would barely serve as a morsel for Cabaro. Only an excellent jump would allow it to brush against Tellun’s belly. Next to the colossal bulk of Dinesh, the marsupial seemed no bigger than a chipmunk.

Tellun raised his head high, the tips of his magnificent antlers overtopping even Dinesh. “Let us begin,” the elk announced. The Great Beasts lost interest in the kangaroo and came to attention. A hush fell upon all of nature. Even the nearby brook seemed to run quieter. Essix looked up at their leader, trying not to succumb to a

sense of awe. Of all the Great Beasts, Tellun was the hardest to read.

“Not all . . . have come,” Rumfuss complained.

“This is the appointed time and place,” Tellun stated. “All were invited. Mulop declined to attend in person. Kovo and Gerathon gave no reply.”

From the corner of her eye, Essix saw the kangaroo scamper away, taking advantage of the small mercy. Hopefully the animal would learn greater care from the experience.

“They’re busy taking over the world,” Briggan growled. “The battle is raging. Why are we here trading words while the fate of Erdas teeters?”

“The Great Beasts have never battled one another,” Arax said firmly. The massive curls of his horns shone brilliant in the sunlight. “Let humans settle their own disputes.”

Briggan began to pace. “Thanks to the Bile, this is not merely a human matter. The Conquerors have stolen animals from each of our spheres and brought them into bondage. Kovo and Gerathon openly aid the enemy in his bid for universal conquest. This war involves all life on Erdas.”

Essix felt sorry for the wolf. Nearly the size of Cabaro, and close to his equal in combat, Briggan was a fighter, not a talker. He wanted nothing more than to rejoin the fray with his wolf pack. The tension was evident in his voice, his movements, his posture.

“Have we anything new to discuss?” Halawir asked. The eagle spoke in clear tones that commanded respect. Only Tellun had a more regal aspect. “When we last met, the Devourer was marshaling his forces with the backing of Kovo and Gerathon. The Bile was spreading. As a group, we elected to wait and see if humanity could quell the threat.”

“Much has occurred since then,” Uraza said, her voice quiet but intense. She held very still, but it was the stillness of a bowstring about to be released, the stillness of a predator before the pounce. “Many of our talismans were stolen. The Evertree was damaged. The spiritual link between man and beast has been put at risk. New bonds are forming, but they are twisted and painful. Young humans and the animals they bond with are becoming sick and deranged. Sometimes they die outright.”

“You want to blame Kovo and Gerathon for damaging the Evertree?” Halawir asked. “Where is your proof? Such speculation is irresponsible. It sounds to me like the actions of conspiring men. How might men have gained access to your talismans? Perhaps because, against our counsel, the four of you have strayed too close to the humans.”

“Too much familiarity with humans can be perilous,” Suka warned. “We keep our distance for good reason.”

“We’re not the only ones who lost our talismans,” Briggan reminded the group. “Where is yours, Halawir?”

The eagle spread his colossal wings in anger, and it was as if the sun had been swallowed by a storm cloud. The council fell into shadow — and silence — until Halawir regained his composure, tucking his wings back into place. “As could be predicted,” the eagle replied, “once you awakened a desire for our talismans, the insatiable humans only craved more. Mine was stolen while I slept, taken from my very aerie. They are sly, these humans, that much is certain.”

“Let humans . . . fight humans,” Rumfuss said gruffly. The boar looked disgruntled. Essix had seldom seen him cheerful.

“This war involves more than humans fighting humans,” Jhi said in velvety tones. “Kovo and Gerathon openly back the Devourer.”

“The outcome will be determined today,” Briggan said. “If the Greencloaks fall, the Devourer will take over the world. It was already too late to test our full strength against theirs. We mustered our best troops and bypassed the majority of the Conqueror armies to bring the fight to their homeland. The gambit is all or nothing.”

“Why not wait to see if the assault works?” Dinesh asked.

“Because without our help, the Greencloaks will fall,” Briggan snarled. “And without their help, we can’t stop the Devourer.”

“Nonsense,” Arax protested. “If we decided to eliminate them, the thirteen of us could wipe out the ape, the serpent, and their human pet at our leisure.”

“You do not appreciate their numbers,” Jhi said calmly. “Their armies are fanatically devoted. Thanks to the Bile, every human soldier has a spirit animal bound to comply with any order. We are indeed powerful, but as a whole their might is greater. Envision a vast colony of ants bringing down an ox. This would be our fate.”

“If we act now, we can end this threat,” Essix said. “We’ll never have to test whether we can defeat the Devourer on our own.”

“And yet I remain unmoved,” Cabaro said flatly. “The same four who urged for war in the last meeting are repeating themselves. Your involvement in human affairs has led to a devastating battle that you will probably lose. Now you want us to rescue you. You wish for your folly to overrule our prudence.”

The council was quiet after this. Essix brought her sharp eyes to meet Cabaro’s own, and despite his callous words, the lion was the first to drop his gaze. Something else was at work behind his protest, though she couldn’t make out what.

“One Great Beast should not attack another,” Dinesh declared. “Such a fight is unthinkable. It has no precedent.”

Muscles bunching, tail swaying, Uraza responded in a poisonous tone. “You want to discuss breaking precedent? Great Beasts have never let humans decorate them with silks. Nor have they helped design shrines to themselves. Dinesh, I’m more interested in the opinions of Great Beasts who can find their own food.”

Rumfuss exploded into laughter.

Dinesh raised his trunk indignantly. “I did not traverse the Deep to listen to —”

“You were shipped and dragged here by humans like cargo,” Uraza spat. “You’d have handlers waving palm fronds at you right now if they weren’t forbidden from Grand Councils.”

Dinesh strained to his full height, long ivory tusks protruding like massive spears. The day dimmed. His voice was thunder.

“Insolence! Defamation! Take that back this instant, or I, or I —”

“Will waddle out from under your canopy into the sunlight?” Uraza finished.

Tossing his huge head, Dinesh heaved his canopy to the ground. He trumpeted and the meadow quaked. Essix felt her feathers vibrating. “If you were worth the trouble, I’d trample you flat as a carpet.”

“Would that not be one Great Beast opposing another?” Uraza replied smugly.

Rumfuss laughed gustily. “Got . . . you there!” he exclaimed. Few things amused the boar as much as arguments.

Dinesh sulkily plopped down on the grass. “A disagreement is not a war. Our views may differ. At times we get irritated and make idle threats. But we have never let our arguments escalate to violence.”

Essix appreciated the point Uraza had made, but disagreed with the delivery. Dinesh was no closer to siding with them. If

anything, the elephant was now further alienated. None of the Great Beasts lacked pride. Angering the others would not produce the desired result.

“The thought of Great Beasts fighting each other is abhorrent,” Essix said. “We may not always agree, but we have always shared a mutual respect.”

“Some more than others,” Dinesh scolded, his wounded eyes on Uraza.

“We attend Grand Councils out of that same respect,” Essix continued. “We cross great distances to confer together. But two of our number lacked the decency to attend today, though they were much closer to the meeting place than most of you.”

“I miss Kovo,” Suka said. “He told the best jokes.”

“Their absence is hardly reason for war,” Cabaro murmured.

“We established that this is the first time Great Beasts have opposed one another in battle,” Essix said. She looked slowly around the circle, meeting the gaze of each of her fellows in turn. “But Great Beasts have also never caused such harm in the world. Our calling has ever been to protect and preserve Erdas, to seek balance, to limit tragedy — not to plunge the world into chaos. When have any of you stripped animals of their free will? When have you supported a tyrannical conqueror? Have you ever shamelessly ignored the warnings of Tellun and the other members of this council? Kovo and Gerathon have committed evils that are unthinkable to the rest of us. They remain unrepentant. Perhaps we must resort to unthinkable means to stop them.”

Her eyes fell last on Arax the Ram, who stamped his hoof. “All Great Beasts are free to act as we deem necessary,” he said ardently. “No one of us is the lone guardian of Erdas. Not even Tellun. We each share a portion of that responsibility, and we each

have our own methods and priorities. We counsel one another when necessary, but we do not compel. Kovo and Gerathon have made no move against any of us.”

“Not directly,” Jhi said. “But they have created war in our domains. And they have used the Bile to force animals in our care into servitude.”

“We’ve all caused conflicts of one kind or another,” Suka said. “Let the humans fight it out. This war could be just what we need. There are too many humans. They multiply on every continent, in every climate. They’re drastically changing the balance. Their herds must be reduced. They take up too much space and consume too many resources. Humans are fast becoming the greatest plague Erdas has faced. Thanks to this war, humans are falling in greater numbers than we have ever seen. Perhaps we should celebrate.”

“Humans are not our enemies,” Tellun said, his voice effortlessly carrying more authority than any of the others could muster at their best. “They are fellow tenants of this world. Nature is full of hard realities. Predators and prey. Seasons of want and seasons of plenty. Humans have the right to survive and prosper as best they can. They have the same claim to Erdas as all creatures.”

“Humans claim . . . too much,” Rumfuss grumbled. “It will get worse.”

“Our world is changing too quickly,” Suka said. “There are many parts of Erdas I no longer recognize — beloved wilds where bears once roamed that are no longer open to us. Humans are the agents behind it. Perhaps Kovo recognizes the need to curb them.”

“Different species rise and fall,” Jhi said, her voice a soothing balm. Essix realized that if anyone could reach Suka through the walls of her quips and anxieties, it would be Jhi. The Great Panda was tranquility itself. “Some become dominant. Others go extinct. Humans *could* threaten the natural balance. They could also help

preserve it. Although humans have great capacity for evil, of all species, they also possess the most potential for good. They are the most adept at putting the resources of Erdas to inventive use. Their ingenuity may cause problems, but it can also be a source of hope.”

“Humankind will not overthrow the balance,” Briggan said stoutly. “Not while we stand watch.”

“But must we fight their battles for them?” Cabaro asked. “I’m with Suka — the more dead humans the better.”

“Humans aren’t all bad,” Dinesh protested.

Suka chuckled. “Not when they worship you.”

Dinesh bristled. “They don’t worship me.”

Suka laughed harder. “What about the temples, and the rituals, and the feasts in your honor? Don’t worry, Dinesh. I love that you domesticate them!”

“I have long sought ways to work *with* humans rather than against them,” Dinesh explained. “My methods have yielded some favorable results. Perhaps I have overplayed the role of enlightened mentor. I’ll consider scaling it back.”

“Humans,” Rumfuss grunted. “Who can trust them?”

“I’ve found certain humans to be wonderful,” Cabaro said slyly. “They’re an acquired taste.”

“Enough!” Briggan barked, sending eavesdropping birds scattering from the trees. “Right now, as we joke and argue, humans are fighting alongside animals to decide the fate of Erdas. Can we move the discussion forward?”

“A valid question has been raised,” Essix said after an uncomfortable moment of quiet. “Should we celebrate when humans fall? It depends on which humans get removed. Some love Erdas as much as we do. Others seem determined to turn it into a wasteland. We must support the humans who have virtue

and vision. Men and women like the Greencloaks, who partner with animals rather than rule them, who cherish the wild places as much as their strongholds. The Devourer represents the worst humanity has to offer. If he establishes himself as ruler of the five continents, all will suffer. We are the Great Beasts. It is our duty to protect Erdas, not to control it. Kovo and Gerathon have gone astray.”

“Is this your argument?” Arax challenged. “We should move against the ape and the serpent because you feel they have gone astray? Where does such a judgment lead us? Who will be the next beast to offend the all-knowing falcon? Me? Dinesh? Cabaro? Perhaps Rumfuss. None of us love the boar. If popularity were vital, he would have been ousted long ago.”

“Nobody . . . likes me?” Rumfuss exclaimed in surprise.

“You have few charms,” Cabaro said silkily.

“Nonsense!” Rumfuss shouted. “I am . . . the best!”

“Cabaro sees little charm in anyone,” Jhi said warmly. “Plenty of us like you just fine.”

“Enlighten us,” Cabaro dared her. “What is it you enjoy about Rumfuss?”

Jhi paused. Essix hoped she could find a compliment quickly. “Rumfuss is sturdy. He has little guile.”

“The same could be said for a tree stump,” Cabaro replied.

“Rumfuss is true to himself,” Jhi continued. “He knows mercy. Beneath his rough exterior beats a good heart.”

“I can bash . . . stone walls,” Rumfuss grumbled.

“I’ve . . . leveled forests. I eat . . . more than my weight. Spurn me. Be jealous. I care not. Envy . . . is the truest flattery.”

“I’m with Arax,” Halawir said. “What right have we to condemn one another? The last time we met in a Grand Council, the majority decision was to let the humans deal with the

Devourer. Afterward, Briggan, Essix, Jhi, and Uraza disregarded that verdict and got involved. Should they not be condemned as well?”

“Go ahead and try,” Uraza growled eagerly.

“You’re far too ready to fight, Leopard,” Dinesh admonished. “I grow weary of your warmongering.”

“Do any of you believe that I love war?” Jhi asked.

The question silenced the group. Essix approved of the tactic. There had been too much speaking and not enough listening.

“I hate violence,” Jhi said gently. “Even as a last resort, I find it revolting. So what would move me to join a battle?”

Nobody replied. Essix hoped Jhi had persuasive arguments ready.

“I detest something more than violence,” Jhi continued.

“Compulsion. Free will is our most fundamental right. Animals taken by the Bile lose their free will. They can’t defend themselves. I know of no more terrible injustice. I cannot allow such an imbalance to become universal. To do so would be to fail as a guardian of Erdas.”

“None of us approve of the Bile,” Ninani said.

All eyes went to the swan. She sat placidly upon the grass, as clean and pale as a lily. Essix had wondered when she might lend her voice to the proceedings. The falcon readjusted upon her perch, waiting for her to continue. Ninani seldom spoke. If Tellun inspired awe, Ninani evoked reverence. She was the kindest and gentlest of the Great Beasts, and by far the most graceful. Essix wished she would speak on their behalf, but the next few moments passed in silence. The swan said nothing more.

“Kovo and Gerathon are behind the Bile.” Briggan finally spoke. “We asked them to dispose of it and they refused. Instead, they’re using the Devourer to spread it across Erdas. We either

stop the Conquerors today, or we watch as Erdas reaps the consequences.”

“The way you paint the situation makes the choice seem clear,” Cabaro said. “But how true are your colors? Don’t Kovo and Gerathon deserve a chance to share their side?”

“This is their chance,” Essix said. “They knowingly forfeited their opportunity to explain themselves. Instead they want to have their way by force. They are no longer protectors of Erdas. They are attempting to conquer it. And that makes stopping them our responsibility. We must tarry no longer. Let us hurry to the battlefield before the opportunity is lost!”

Tellun stirred, his antlers creaking like the bows of a great tree. The others waited for his pronouncement. “We have a grave decision before us,” the elk said. “Do we unite against two of our own and halt the designs they have set in motion? Or do we trust that they remain guardians of Erdas with purposes outside our understanding?”

“I don’t think I could kill Kovo,” Suka said glumly. “I like him.”

“You certainly could,” Uraza growled. “As could Cabaro. As could Briggan. As could I. You may find him an acquired taste.”

Essix cringed. It was the wrong moment for antagonistic humor.

Tellun snorted angrily. A charge filled the air, as if lightning might soon follow. “No matter our decision, I will not condone the slaying of a Great Beast. For one thing, it would be futile. While the Evertree stands, our destinies are tied to Erdas. If one form is lost, another will rise. If Kovo and Gerathon have betrayed their sacred duty, I would consider imprisonment, but not death.”

“You four return to your battle if you wish,” Dinesh said. “I’ll not be joining you.”

“Do you approve of the fight?” Briggan asked.

“I’m disengaging,” the elephant said. “I will continue to protect my talisman. I will defend Erdas in my own way. The rest of you do as you will.”

“How shocking,” Uraza mocked. “At least have your worshippers pray for us.”

“Let the humans . . . fight it out,” Rumfuss grumbled.

“We mustn’t move against Kovo and Gerathon unless they move against us,” Arax said. “I felt that way before. I feel the same way now.”

For a moment Essix had thought they might convince them. Even the most stubborn had wavered. Now she felt the opportunity slipping away, like a rabbit disappearing into its burrow. It was infuriating. The stakes were so high! The truth had been spoken plainly. They had made a strong case. But that did not compel the others to agree. “What about the innocent animals claimed by the Bile?” Essix asked.

“Are you new here?” Cabaro replied glibly. “What about the innocent bunny claimed by the fox? What of the blameless gazelle slain by the leopard? So some animals get forced into spirit bonds. That carries certain benefits. They’re far from dead. We can’t even every contest. Sometimes an animal can’t fight back.”

“I don’t want to fight Great Beasts,” Suka said. “Maybe if I was cornered. It just doesn’t seem right to me.”

“We should wait,” Halawir said. “There is not enough evidence of wrongdoing from Kovo and Gerathon. It’s too soon to condemn two of our own.”

“I agree,” Cabaro said. “I expect the four champions of humanity will fight on. But I shall not join them.”

“That is six of the thirteen against,” Briggan said. “Not yet a majority.”

“Eight of fifteen if you count Kovo and Gerathon,” Halawir said, his great yellow eye lingering on Cabaro a moment before moving to the wolf.

“They spurned this council and lost their say,” Briggan insisted.

“The same tiresome four have spoken for war,” Cabaro said. “Who else sides with the six?”

“Mulop has heeded our words from afar,” Tellun announced. “He is content to let the four continue their campaign, and has no objection to the others abstaining.”

“Seven of thirteen,” Cabaro said.

“Tellun,” Briggan implored. “Surely you will aid us. Surely you see the need. I have glimpsed the outcome of this day in a vision. If only the four of us stand against the Devourer, I fear it will end in darkness.”

Rumfuss laughed brashly. “All days . . . end in darkness.”

“I side with the majority of the council,” Tellun said. “But I approve of you four continuing as you commenced. I know you sincerely mean to protect Erdas, just as I suspect Kovo and Gerathon do not. I will watch the battle closely. Should they cause you to fall, it will not be in vain.”

“Will it take our deaths to convince you?” Uraza growled, rising lightly to her feet. Essix could feel her impatience finally coming untethered. The leopard had given up hope.

“It would be a start,” Cabaro replied dryly. “My hunting grounds will nearly double.”

Uraza surveyed Jhi, Essix, and Briggan, her violet eyes bright with anger. “We don’t have to do this. We should let these fools inherit the world they deserve.”

“Almost tempting,” Briggan said.

“We can only control ourselves,” Essix said. “We nudge others toward wisdom as best we can, but their decisions are theirs to make. It’s often disappointing to try to influence others.”

“That’s the game Kovo and Gerathon are playing,” Jhi said. “Asserting control over others. Over everything, perhaps.”

“Shall we disappoint them?” Essix asked.

Briggan raised his head high. His deep blue eyes gazed at something that the rest of them couldn’t see. Essix remembered the wolf’s warning: This day would end in darkness. “I’ll go alone if I must. While I live, Erdas has a protector.”

“Not alone,” Essix said, stretching her wings. “I won’t abandon the people trying to stand against this evil.”

“Nor will I,” Jhi said. Her silver eyes were heavy for once, with some inner burden. “Though Suka might be of more use today.”

“The four of us, then,” Uraza said. “We’ve lost enough time.”

Uraza launched herself away from the group, her sleek body elongating with every bounding stride. Without a backward glance, Briggan followed close behind. Jhi trundled after them at less than half their speed.

The wolf let out a resounding howl. Essix felt her heart fill with fire. The call echoed across Stetriol. Several of the Great Beasts hung their heads. It was hard to hear that battle cry without responding.

“Different day, same conversation,” Cabaro remarked, stretching. He looked at Essix. “Not in a hurry?”

“I’ll rejoin the fight well ahead of them,” Essix said coolly. “I’m disappointed in all of you. If we can’t unify against a threat this obvious, what purpose do we serve? Now that the matter is settled, let me share some final words. Mulop, you see more than

you understand. Cabaro, you are a devastating waste of potential. I once mistook your pelt for golden, but it's clearly yellow."

The lion snarled, but did not even rise from his reclined position.

"Halawir," Essix continued. "You have all the manners of royalty, and none of the substance. I thought you, of all of us, would see the cunning work of Kovo behind the theft of our talismans. Something unforgivable has happened to us, cloaked behind the humans.

"Suka, hiding from tough choices is a choice; and, Rumfuss, never changing means never improving. Arax, how can you demand freedom for yourself but not for those in your care? Dinesh, don't let your greatness be only a matter of size.

"Tellun . . ." Essix paused, momentarily unsure how to proceed. The elk seemed unimpeachable. And yet . . . "I respect you, but I do not understand you. I fear you are too distant."

"And Ninani?" Cabaro asked expectantly.

Essix gazed upon the swan. "I believe that Ninani does her best."

"Fight bravely," Ninani said, her voice music for the soul. "If I had it in me, I would join you. For what it's worth, I believe you. I will help as I can."

Bolstered by the soft-spoken encouragement and disgusted by the others, the falcon spread her wings and took flight. As she gained altitude, the last remnant of conversation she caught was Dinesh inquiring whether it was time to eat.

Higher and higher she wheeled, seeking currents that would bear her more swiftly. The same sky that had hastened her journey to the meeting conspired to slow her return. At the limits of sight, the battle raged on, an ocean of carnage simplified by the distance.

The Grand Council had been a waste of effort. Of course she, Briggan, Uraza, and Jhi were returning alone. When action was required, brave individuals were infinitely preferable to committees. Essix scolded herself for believing the others could be swayed. Wishful thinking had clouded her judgment. They had lost valuable time.

Below her and somewhat ahead, Briggan and Uraza raced side by side. Jhi trailed behind, though closer than Essix had expected. The falcon grimly assessed the sky. Perhaps she had been overconfident thinking she would outpace the others back to the battle. Earlier in the day, the winds had seemed more neutral, with currents she could have used for her return trip. Now, high and low, far and wide, the air was against her.

Could one of the Great Beasts have manipulated the atmosphere? Neither Kovo nor Gerathon had that power, but Arax had some influence over the winds, as did Halawir. Essix cursed herself. She should have withheld her criticisms.

The winds were not enough to defeat her, but they were a nuisance. It made the return trip a grueling chore. If the unfavorable currents persisted, even Jhi might rejoin the battle ahead of her.

As she muscled her way forward, Essix watched wolves mass around Briggan, howling with joy at the return of their Packleader. Curiously, a human Greencloak girl ran along with the wolves, wearing an expression of mad exhilaration. Her black mink spirit animal dashed excitedly beside her. Even from high above, Essix could sense Briggan's resolve spreading through the pack. She had never felt such determination from the wolf. It almost made her feel sorry for the Conquerors.

The closer Essix came to the battleground, the clearer she saw how far the conflict had progressed. The Greencloaks' forces had

pressed forward in a valiant attempt to reach the Devourer. As a result, the enemy had given them ground, then closed in from the flanks, unleashing all of their reserves. Surrounded and losing momentum, the beleaguered Greencloaks were about to be annihilated.

Then Briggan reached the field, slamming into the enemy like an avalanche, backed by a horde of wolves. Uraza came with him, ravaging Conquerors everywhere she ran. The enemy army buckled, some fleeing, some turning to face the new threat. It bought time for the main body of the Greencloaks, allowing some of them to push nearer to the Devourer.

Corpses accumulated in drifts. Blood muddied the ground. Animals and humans clashed and fell.

Sacrificing altitude to knife forward against the headwind, Essix approached the front of the battle where Gerathon, Kovo, and the Devourer awaited their foes. A hulking mound of muscle, the ape clutched a huge club and shouted a challenge at the onrushing Greencloaks. Sinuous and menacing, Gerathon coiled and reared up, flaring her broad hood. Clad in foreboding armor, the Devourer drew his sword, his enormous saltwater crocodile at his side.

The Greencloak charge was losing momentum. The Devourer's bodyguards held them, and then began driving them back.

Far across the battlefield, Jhi raised up, paws swaying. The enemy defenders seemed to lose vigor. A bold cluster of Greencloaks surged forward, steel ringing against steel, claws raking, teeth biting.

Club held high, Kovo stalked forward to deal with the oncoming Greencloaks. Thanks to his size, a few swipes of his weapon would end the attack. Briggan got there first, an unstoppable fury of fangs and claws. The ape staggered back.

Briggan's jaws found the arm with the club. The weapon fell and the ape cowered as Briggan stood over him, hackles raised, crimson teeth inches from his throat.

The wolf did no more. His mandate from Tellun was to capture, not to kill, so he stood over the ape, paws on his chest, holding him in check.

Then Essix saw him — a lean Niloan warrior, only lightly armored, but lithe and quick, nimbly dodging through the ferocious maze of combat. Carrying only a slender spear, the warrior refused to engage any combatant, deflecting blows and bodies with his weapon rather than attacking. Stepping lightly, moving surely, he weaved through the skirmish, a fragile twig somehow surviving a violent stretch of rapids. Essix recognized him as Tembo, the Niloan goat thief who had become the human leader of the Greencloaks. Her keen eyes could see that his vervet monkey spirit animal was resting as a tattoo upon his arm. So where had this uncanny agility come from?

Something about the way the Niloan moved drew Essix's gaze back to Jhi. Defended by Greencloaks, the panda remained in a meditative state, swaying rhythmically. Conquerors came at Jhi left and right, but she was well-guarded, especially fiercely by a Zhongese young woman with a pied starling on her shoulder. Improbably, the girl fought with her eyes closed, as if sensing her attackers by sound alone. In a flash of insight, Essix recognized the connection between the sprinting Niloan warrior and the panda. Jhi was with him, enhancing his natural gifts, heightening his senses. No wonder he flowed through the intense combat with such otherworldly grace!

Conquerors rushed to attack Briggan and free Kovo. The wolf had outdistanced his pack, losing his fellow canines as they

became mired in the tumult of battle. As the first Conqueror blows fell, Uraza arrived, tearing into the attackers savagely.

Then Gerathon struck, entwining her long body around the leopard in a desperate squeeze. Struggling against the deadly embrace, Uraza became vulnerable not only to Gerathon's fangs, but to Conqueror spears and swords.

Essix had almost reached the skirmish. She dived recklessly downward, holding her silence to attack with surprise.

The Devourer flung his sword to Kovo. The blade skittered over the ground, coming to a halt just within the ape's reach. As Briggan turned to snap at a bothersome soldier, Kovo slashed the wolf's throat, following the murderous strike with further stabs and slashes.

Essix felt each blow as if it had torn her own flesh. The enraged ape lunged to aid Gerathon. Essix tried to hasten her approach, but the wind surged against her. Uraza thrashed against the serpent as Kovo plunged the sword again and again. With the ground rushing closer, Essix glanced back to see Jhi's Greencloak guardians crumbling. A host of weapons pierced the docile panda, who continued to hold her trancelike focus despite the injuries.

Tembo, the Niloan warrior, had almost reached the Devourer, spear poised to throw. But the saltwater crocodile darted forward, vicious jaws agape. Facing certain doom, the warrior lost his path to the enemy commander.

Essix landed on the crocodile like a whirlwind, her talons tearing at its long jaws.

Sidestepping the scuffle, Tembo came within range and hurled his spear. The sleek weapon found a gap in the armor, impaling the Devourer, who staggered and fell. In that moment King Feliandor looked to Essix like the boy he truly was — a young man caught up in schemes he barely understood. But boy or not,

he was the human leader of the Conquerors. And now he was gone.

Essix could only rejoice for an instant.

Club now in hand, Kovo descended upon her. Despite her considerable size, the falcon's bones were relatively light and fragile. As Jhi fell in the distance, Essix's body shattered beneath the onslaught.

Left to die, time skipped along in disjointed intervals. Essix heard Kovo shouting in frustration as his soldiers broke ranks. Why were the Conquerors losing heart? Was it the fall of the Devourer?

Essix found it hard to breathe. The scavengers of Stetriol would be the big winners today. Tonight they would feast like kings!

High above, a speck circled, almost at the limit of Essix's sharp vision. Halawir? Was the eagle here? Was she imagining it?

And then the presence washed over her, like sunrise, and new life, and the cleansing calm that follows mourning. She did not need to see Tellun to know he had arrived. No wonder the Greencloaks had taken heart! No wonder the enemy quailed!

Kovo screamed in frustration. The cries were distant, muted, fading.

Essix could not open her eyes, but she felt the warm breath of the nostrils near her face. Was Tellun trying to heal her? She was too far gone, ruined inside. The elk should help the others. Then, reaching out with what remained of her senses, Essix discovered that Jhi, Briggan, and Uraza were already gone.

Essix failed once more to open her eyes. She was slipping away, but she heard Tellun speak.

“Rest for a season, noble falcon. You have served Erdas well. As you will serve her again.”

And then there was quiet.



Essix rested in the tranquil stillness. She had no desire to rouse her mind. Time lost all meaning. The silence was peaceful and good.

And then, as if dawn had broken, there was a light. A great radiance exploded around her, shifting and liquid, noisy with the gasping of human voices.

Essix opened her eyes, startled by the brilliance, and in it she saw the lean, tan face of a boy, grimy but shrewd. His eyes watched hers with astonishment.

Interesting, Essix thought. With a flurry of wings, she leaped up to the boy's shoulder and gently pinched her claws into his skin.

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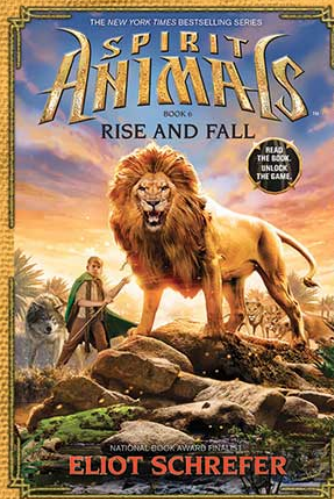
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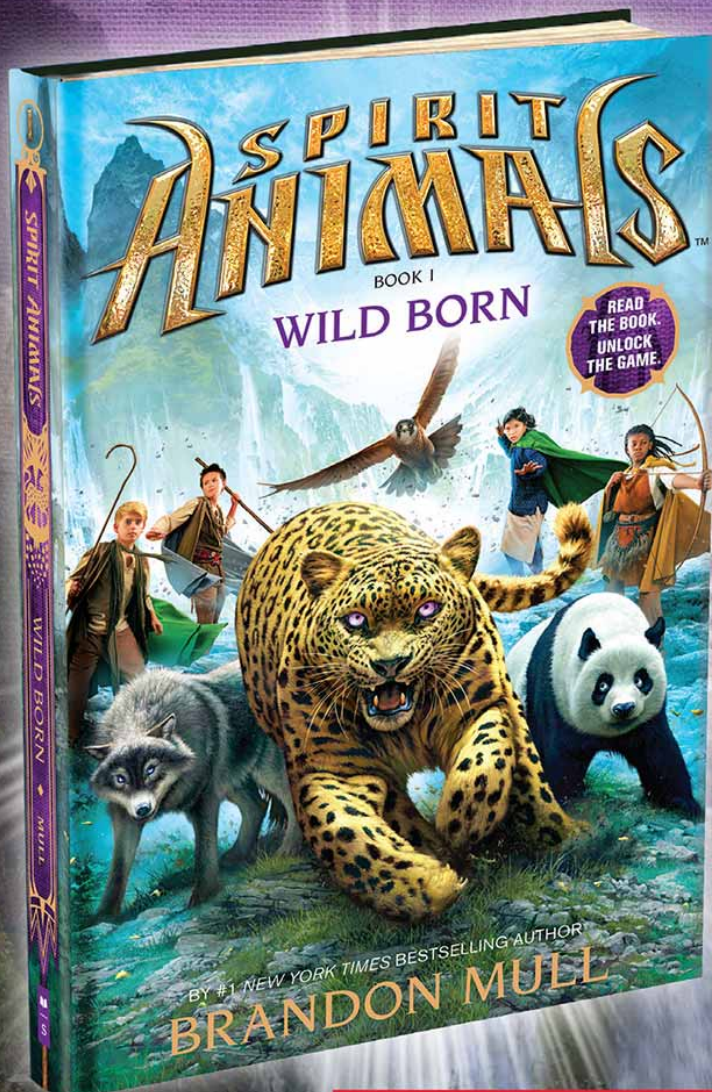
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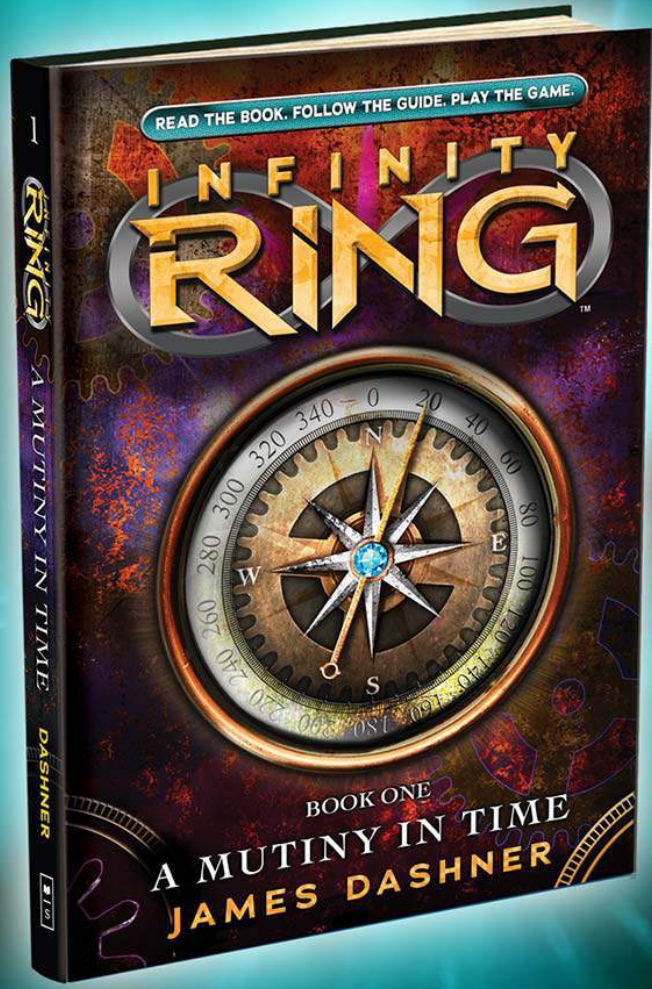
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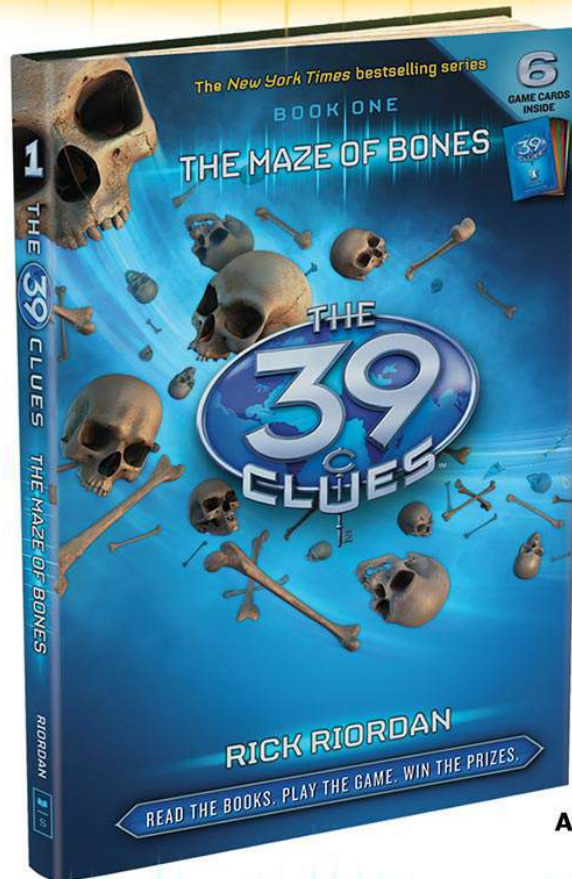


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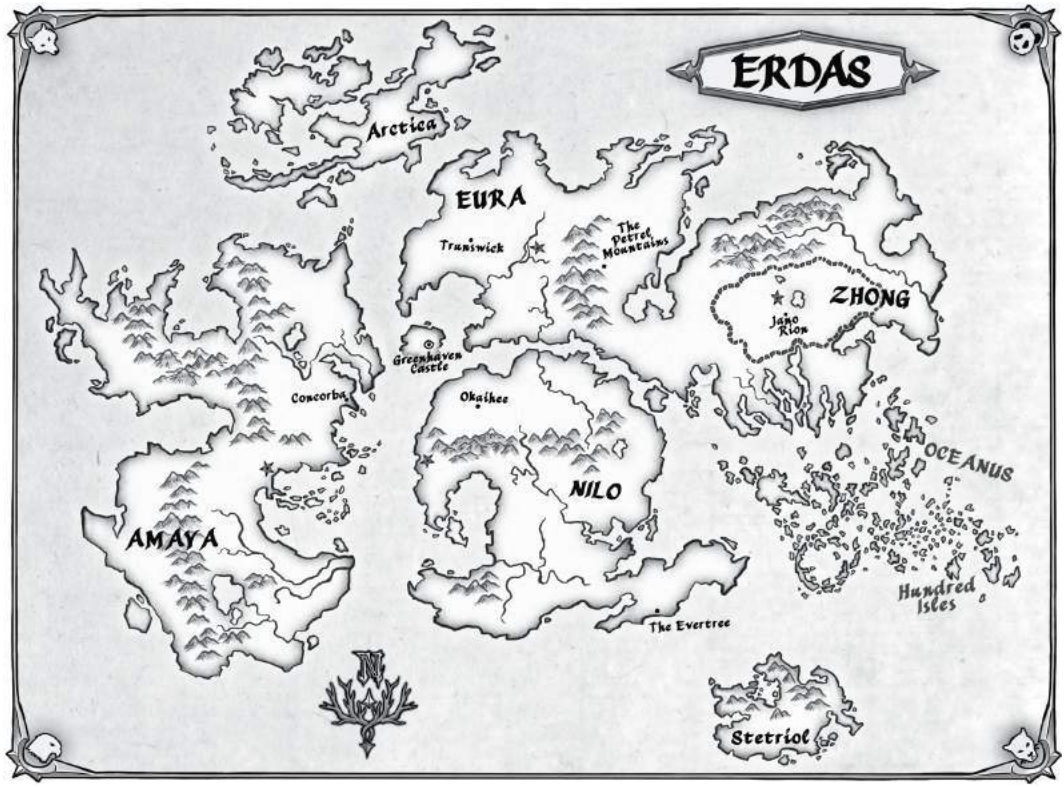
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HALAWIR





UNLEASHED

By Emily Seife

THERE WAS A TREMENDOUS BRILLIANCE, LIKE A BLINDFOLD had just been pulled away from his eyes, and for a moment Halawir felt nothing but the sting of too much light everywhere. He was consumed by a purple radiance, the whole world like the penumbra of the sun.

And then the rest of his body caught up to his eyes. He was joyfully aware of the wind in his feathers. He could taste the salt spray and smell the raw, endless sea pulsing below him. He heard the rush of the air as it parted to make room for his body.

He was soaring.

He pumped his wide wings up and down, enjoying the way they pushed the air around, currents tense and smooth as water, the tips of his

wings brushing lightly against the sky. He stretched them out to their fullest span, nearly seven feet, so that he could see the sun glinting on the blue and gray of the feathers under his wings.

Halawir let out an exultant scream.

He was a Great Beast, and king of these skies.

Fast and focused, majestic wings now flush against his body, Halawir reached the apex of his flight and turned to dive down. A seagull crossed his line of vision, and he lunged at it playfully.

Of course, the seagull didn't know that Halawir was simply feeling out his strength—it assumed it was destined to be dinner. It flapped away as fast as it could, squawking wildly. Halawir's eyes squinted in an avian smile. If he were in the mood to hunt, that seagull wouldn't have a chance. But he let the bird go.

Now he saw an ocean of Erdas spread out below him. He still didn't know where he was, just that it was good to be here at all—to be back.

He zipped down farther still, skimming along the surface of the foamy sea—following the curves and crests of the waves but never getting wet—then up over a sea trader's sleek boat—

The next moment, a heavy net fell over his head. His wings tangled up in the rope and he came crashing down, landing on a hard surface with an undignified thud. He tried flapping his wings, squirming to get free of the net, but he only got more and more ensnared. Casting his eyes about wildly, Halawir could see that he was on the deck of the boat. Well-worn wooden planks slid beneath his talons as he scrambled to get his footing back.

“You got him!” exclaimed a high voice, followed by footsteps running toward him. “I can't believe it! He's incredible.”

It sounded like a child. Halawir's panic threatened to overwhelm him, but as the pumping in his heart subsided, he could see the young girl crouched next to him. She looked to be about eleven. Her skin was brown and her hair was pale, as if the sun had both toasted and bleached her.

A deeper voice spoke. It was a man dressed simply but neatly, with the same dark skin as the girl. “Cordalles, you did it! You’ve summoned a spirit animal!” The man paused, and Halawir could hear him trying to control the pride in his voice. “A bird is the perfect creature for a seafarer like you.”

“That’s not just a *bird*,” snapped the woman standing next to him. “Did you see its wingspan? Look at its hooked beak. It’s an eagle, Imari.”

“An eagle?” said the girl, Cordalles. Halawir turned his yellow eyes to peer at her. “It can’t be an eagle,” the girl continued. “Everyone knows that you can’t summon an eagle as a spirit animal, because Halawir—” She bit off the end of her sentence.

“Halawir,” the man echoed. “The Great Beast?”

“The *betrayer*,” said the woman sourly.

“This can’t be him,” the girl said, but Halawir could hear the doubt in her voice. She didn’t sound all that happy. Well, that made two of them.

Cordalles craned her neck to get a better look at his face through the net. Halawir pumped his massive wings again in protest, but the heavy net didn’t allow him to gain any traction in the air. He let out a screech of rage. It was absurd to be kept trapped by a bunch of seafaring nobodies who probably couldn’t even spot a fish flashing beneath the waves from three hundred meters away.

Halawir had come close to ruling all of Erdas alongside Kovo and Gerathon. He had held the shining talismans in his talons, had seen the arrogant Greencloaks run screaming from their silly castle. The war had turned against him and his allies in the end, but Halawir knew what it was to be one of the mightiest creatures on the face of Erdas. He knew what it was to make people tremble. And now—

He narrowed his yellow eyes at the girl to show that they were not friends, that they could never be friends. But she was ignoring that very clear signal. In fact, she reached her pointer finger out to lightly touch one of the blue-gray feathers under his mighty wings.

“He is beautiful,” she said.

“Careful, Cordalles,” the girl’s mother warned, and rightfully so.

Halawir would certainly have pulled away, if he could. Would have happily clawed her eyes out, if he could. But he was immobilized, with no choice but to wait as she ran the tip of her finger along the length of his feathers, as if he were some little fluffy-headed chick, too young and weak and stupid to know how to fly.

Still, as she stroked his glossy feathers, he felt himself weakening. It was like some tiny yellow chick *was* there inside him, cracking out of the shell of his heart and leaning in toward Cordalles.

It surprised and scared him, the tentative feeling of connection between them. The hours the girl spent at the top of the boat’s rigging, the sea flying by her and the wind whipping her hair into a froth, left a scent of the sky on her. That was something they shared. He sensed that she loved the feel of the wind in her face, like he did.

But he didn’t like this weak spot in himself. She was holding him prisoner.

That could not be forgiven.

He would not be some girl’s spirit animal, dependent on her whim. He would not subject himself to the passive state. Maybe that was fine for slow-moving Jhi, or a more common creature, but not him.

Halawir used the power of his strong will to turn himself away from the spark of their bond. He would ignore it until, like any burning ember with no fuel, it would fade out and die.

As he had sat there like a dumb cow, dazed by the touch of the girl’s finger, the older woman had been approaching. Now, all of a sudden, she reached under the net and pulled on Halawir’s leg.

Again, he fought, the sudden softness forgotten, this undesirable intimacy stirring him to intense anger. He thrashed his wings and neck and legs, but she had him, she had his delicate leg. He tensed his talons, hoping for at least one good scratch on her tough hide, and when that didn’t work he curved his body around and dove in with his beak for a

peck. He tasted blood. She screeched and pulled away, but not before she had slipped a little knotted rope up over his foot and tightened it around his leg.

“That beast attacked me!” The woman brandished her arm in front of her. Halawir saw the gouge his beak had made in her fleshy forearm. Good.

“Mother!” the girl cried. “Are you okay? I’m so sorry! I didn’t know he would—Halawir, how could you do that?”

“I’m fine. At least I got the leash on so we can get him under control.” The mother’s mouth twisted into a grim smile and she handed the other end of the rope to the girl. Then together, the woman and the man untangled the net and lifted it away from Halawir.

The second it was gone, he took off into the sky.

He wasn’t stupid; some part of his mind remembered that he was leashed, but his instincts were connected directly to his muscles, and he reacted long before his mind was able to chime in with some helpful advice. His heart soared and his wings followed, the instinct alive and immediate. Like an arrow shot into the sky, he took off—until he reached the end of the cord.

It yanked back on his leg, hard, and he boomeranged down in a tumble of feathers and fury onto the deck.

“Shhh,” said the girl, his captor, the other end of the rope twisted around her wrist. “Calm down.”

Calm down.

He was on a leash like a groveling *pet*, and she thought he was going to roll over and play along?

She looked up at the adults. “Isn’t he supposed to feel a bond with me?”

“It’s natural, when a spirit animal is first called, for the bond to be weak,” answered her mother. “It’s something that both partners must work on and cultivate. Something that the two will strengthen over the years. Usually.”

Halawir let out a cackling laugh and his feathers raised like hackles. He wouldn't be working to strengthen this bond. He had no interest in becoming any closer with a sniveling child. He'd had enough bad experiences with children already. He shook out his wings, brushing off the memory of Meilin, Abeke, Rollan, and Conor. Those baby Greencloaks who had cost him, well, everything.

"Okay, we'll work on it," Cordalles said, only the hint of a question in her voice. "I'm sure that once we spend time together our bond will feel more, um ... " She coughed. "I'm sure there's lots we can learn from each other, anyway. Lots he can teach me." Her voice perked up with newfound enthusiasm. "Maybe soon I'll be running across the deck of the boat as fast as though I had wings."

Her father smiled. "Or maybe you could be our new lookout, once you have eyesight as powerful as an eagle's. Relieve Bao of his night watch."

"Yes!" Cordalles crowed. "And I'll—"

"One step at a time, little sparrow," her mother said, placing her hand firmly on Cordalles's shoulder.

"You'll see," Cordalles said. She shrugged the hand back off. "And with Halawir to look out for me, you'll let me go off on my own when we dock, maybe? Since he'll be there to protect me. We'll start working on strengthening our bond right away, won't we, Halawir?"

It was a clear question that demanded a clear answer.

He unfolded his wings and gave one powerful beat to launch himself up. Hovering on the softest air current, he felt himself relax into the air. Floating lightly at the end of his tether, he positioned himself directly above Cordalles. He could see her parents standing close by her, and the ship's crew looking on curiously from around the deck.

Then he loosened his bowels and pooped on her head.



An hour later, Halawir was sitting on a small perch in a cramped bunk in the depths of the boat. He had to hunch his shoulders up around his neck to fit his bulk inside the tiny room. There was a low ceiling that sloped up from an even lower wall. Only one round porthole showed a glimpse of the outdoors: a swinging view that flashed between sea and sky, sea and sky. Cordalles had just finished washing her hair in a bucket and was toweling it dry in the opposite corner of the room, as far away from Halawir as she could get, which wasn't very far at all.

"I didn't know Great Beasts had such great senses of humor," Cordalles said, not laughing.

Halawir was aware that his form of objection had not been the most *dignified*, unfortunately. But in this instance, he hadn't felt he'd had any avenues of complaint open to him other than this silent protest.

He could tell that Cordalles and her parents didn't trust him. Well, that made them and every other human on the planet. His reputation was, at the moment, much more powerful than he was.

She took a deep breath. "You are my spirit animal, you know. I didn't choose this any more than you did, but here you are. You're as bonded to me as I am to you, so we should really make the best of it. Trust each other, and all that. Okay?"

She stuck her left arm out in front of her.

Halawir stared at her blankly. Was this some strange seafarer's friendship ritual? No, thanks.

Then, with a start, he realized that she was holding out her arm for him to transform into a tattoo on her skin, the passive form of a spirit animal. Was she out of her mind? He let out a harsh cry of derision. She was a fool and had learned nothing about him if she thought that he would willingly submit himself to her.

He turned his back to her haughtily and closed his eyes, but she kept talking to him.

"You know my parents don't like you. They don't trust you at all. To tell you the truth, they don't trust me much, either." She sighed.

“Whenever we dock, they never let me go off on my own to look around. We visit some of the finest cities in the world, all the largest ports in Erdas, and they never let me out of their sight! So, if it makes you feel any better, I know what it feels like not to be trusted.”

Halawir wished he could shut his ears as well as his eyes. For now he was a prisoner, stuck here in these oppressive quarters out in the middle of the ocean, but soon he would be free of these humans and their petty quarrels and concerns.

At least he wasn't in danger at the moment. He would rest. Gather his strength. As soon as they approached land, he would make his escape.



Halawir kept his eyes firmly shut to the world until, at long last, he heard footsteps. A moment later, Cordalles's mother squeezed through the low door to the room. She perched on the bunk next to her daughter and ran her fingers through the girl's wet hair.

“I've been talking to your father,” she said in a low voice, as though Halawir couldn't hear if she whispered. “We're not quite sure what to do with this ... with your ... with Halawir.”

“What do you mean?” Cordalles said.

“Well, it's unheard of to summon a Great Beast, except for the four heroes who stopped the Conquerors. We've spoken to all the sailors on the ship, but no one's got a clue what it means, or what to do with him. We're in luck, though. We're heading through the Strait of Gibril toward Amaya, which means that Greenhaven, the home of the Greencloaks, will be pretty much on our way. Your father and I think we should stop there. Perhaps the Greencloaks will be able to give us some guidance. They spend their lives dealing with matters of these bonds. Someone there will certainly know what to do with it—with him.”

Cordalles furrowed her brow. “There's nothing *to* do. He's my spirit animal. Just like Juno has Freeram, or Bao has—”

“My sweet seagull, you must see that it’s not the same. This bird was one of the masterminds of the Devourer Wars. He’s smaller now, so I know it’s hard to believe, but he was once so huge that the Devourer rode through the skies on his back. This is the creature whose schemes and tricks cost thousands of lives. He even betrayed his fellow Great Beasts. I’m not sure that’s exactly the type of animal you want as your cabinmate.”

“We have a bond, though,” Cordalles said. “I can *definitely* feel it.”

Halawir almost choked. She was clearly lying through her teeth to her mother. He couldn’t help admiring her almost a little; she was very convincing.

He must have made a strange noise, because Cordalles’s mother started. Halawir wondered if she realized that he could understand every word she was saying.

She pulled Cordalles into her arms. “Just because you love birds doesn’t mean they’re all your friends. Look, I’m not saying you’ll need to be separated from him permanently. I just think we should get some advice from the Greencloaks, is all. It’s only a few days’ sailing out of our way. We’ve informed the crew of the slight change in route. They’re happy to be getting the extra pay.” She leaned down and kissed the girl on the top of her head. “Let your father and I decide what’s best for you, my sparrow.”

Cordalles shrugged her mother off. She straightened her narrow shoulders and looked right at Halawir. “You wouldn’t betray me, would you? You can feel that there’s something—something connecting us?”

Halawir closed his eyes against the intensity of her gaze.

They were taking him to Greenhaven, the home of his enemies.

For the very first time, he felt thankful that fate had brought him this girl.

He would finally have a chance for revenge.

Just then, the sack came down over his head.



Cordalles's mother tossed him unceremoniously into a windowless cabin even smaller—if such a thing was possible—than the one Cordalles had originally brought him to.

She stood watch from a safe distance while a burly sailor tied his leash to a post and placed bowls of water and dried meat near him.

Finally, the sailor left the room, giving one last suspicious glance to Halawir as he left, and the woman smiled in faux apology.

“I know you'll understand,” she said. “I can't let my daughter become too attached to you. It's for her own good. Yours too, probably. What if a true bond developed? It would be all the worse when we would eventually have to separate you two. Because my daughter is *not* going to spend her life with a traitor as her spirit animal. She deserves better than that.” Saliva flew from her lips as she spat the last words at him. Perhaps she was trying to shame him, but Halawir didn't care about that at all. “We'll leave you with the Greencloaks,” she continued. “You can be their problem.”

So she'd been lying, too. Halawir couldn't care less about being separated from Cordalles, either. The only thing that mattered to him was that the ship continued on its course toward Greenhaven.

The woman left the room. He could hear the sound of the door locking behind her, followed by running feet, and then, faintly, the sound of someone crying. He perked up his ears. Eagles were known for their keen eyesight, but his hearing wasn't bad, either.

“—have to let me in.” It was Cordalles, sobbing and pleading with her mother. “I'm telling you, he'll listen to me. Don't you trust me at *all*?”

“It's not you I don't trust.”

“You never let me do anything!”

Then the deeper voice of the father: “Cordalles, listen to your mother. She's protecting you for your own good. This is only temporary, until we

hear what the Greencloaks have to say. Then we can use their training and wisdom to make sure your bond with Halawir is a good one.”

Footsteps, and the crying grew fainter.

He was alone.



Day after day passed, and the only thing Halawir learned about boats was that life on board was interminably slow.

The light that snuck under the door frame faded and grew and faded again. The same sailor came with food day after day, but he never took Halawir out, or even made eye contact or spoke to the bird.

Awake and asleep, Halawir dreamed of freedom. He pictured the day when Cordalles would take him on shore to the Greencloak castle. They would never let him stay with her—but who knows what they *would* want to do with him? Throw him into another prison, probably.

No, he needed to break away before Lenori and the other Greencloaks realized who he was.... Maybe he would make his escape as they walked onto land. He could startle Cordalles, make her drop him. Or should he wait until he was inside the castle, among his enemies, poised for revenge? The plan changed every time he thought about it. The only constant was his hunger for freedom.

Then one day, the dawn brought a tremendous amount of noise and excitement. Halawir could hear the sailors running around the deck, readying the boat, hauling ropes—he tried to peer through the crack in the door to see what was going on, but it was impossible to make anything out.

It was only when the endless forward motion of the boat suddenly stopped that he realized they had reached a port. Was this Greenhaven? Had they gotten there already? The deadly fog of monotony suddenly lifted from his brain, and he perked up. At any moment, Cordalles or her

mother would show up to bring him out of his prison and take him to the Greencloaks!

He waited impatiently. He could hear the crew singing and laughing as they raced down the gangplank to shore, but still, no one came for him.

Then the deck quieted down.

What had happened? Why had they left him behind? This was not part of any of his hundreds of plans. What now?

Despair tore through him. He would never be free of this family, this boat, this room. He picked up the water dish with his talons and hurled it across the room. It hit the far wall with a clang, water splashing everywhere.

Then Halawir heard a careful key in the lock. The sailor in charge of feeding him must have been left on board to keep watch. But it was not the usual time for food, and the sound was softer and more hesitant than usual.

The door creaked open, and Cordalles threw herself around the edge.

“They didn’t take me with them!” She stared at him with wide eyes, as though she expected him to know what she was talking about.

He cocked his head to the side. After so many days in isolation, he had to admit that he was the slightest bit pleased to see her.

“We stopped at a port to drop off some cargo. A quick stop.” Halawir felt a rush of relief. They weren’t at Greenhaven yet after all. There was still hope. He perked up, fluffing his feathers.

Cordalles smiled, noticing his attention, before remembering why she’d stormed in. “My parents wouldn’t even let me off the boat!” She picked up Halawir’s battered water dish and threw it at a wall, just as he had. “I thought that now that I’ve summoned a spirit animal they’d have a little more confidence in me, let me explore on my own—and instead they’re worse than ever! They don’t even let me off the boat!” She buried her head in her hands for a minute. “Well, we’ll show them, won’t we? We really have to prove ourselves now.”

She stood up. Her cheeks were flushed. “I stole the spare key! Now I can come see you whenever I want. And I will. I’m sorry that I was so ... so scared. That I didn’t come see you before.

“There’s only one more stop before Greenhaven. We’ll be docking at Soussia for an afternoon, and I’m going to prove to them that we can do just fine on our own. By the time we get to Greenhaven, we’ll be able to show the Greencloaks that we really do have a bond. That they can trust both of us.”

There was a distant thud—the sound of new cargo being loaded into the steerage.

“I have to go,” Cordalles whispered. “But I’ll be back.”



The next night, back out on the ocean, she kept her promise, coming to visit after everyone was asleep but the few night watchmen.

“Are you there?” she whispered. “I didn’t dare light a candle.”

Halawir could see perfectly at night, so he watched her fumbling blindly with the door while her eyes adjusted to the deeper darkness of the cabin. She pressed her back against the wall and slid down to the floor. He could see that her pupils were completely dilated, little black holes in the night. Cordalles pulled a bag off her arm and rummaged around inside.

“If I’m going to get them to trust us, I have to be sure I can trust you,” she said. “Then, at our next stop, we’ll sneak off the boat together. I’ve started working on something. I’m almost done. Then we can get you outside again.”

That got his attention immediately.

She took out a pair of tiny leather anklets, and then pulled out a partially cut piece of leather.

He realized she had been making him a set of jesses, the traditional leash used for trained hawks. It was a strap cut from leather, used for

keeping hawks—or Great Eagles, in this case—from flying away.

Jess, he thought. It sounded like *jest*, like something fun. In fact, it was just the opposite. But if it was a step toward his freedom ...

It would be more comfortable, he supposed, than the rough piece of rope the mother had fastened to his ankle his first day on the boat. But he was not interested in analyzing the comfort levels of the tools of his imprisonment. He was more focused on getting free.

“I’d rather not use the jess at all, you know,” Cordalles said, half to him, half to herself. “But”—and she looked up at him sharply—“I’m not entirely sure that you won’t fly away the second I let you off the leash.”

He couldn’t believe she was even debating the question. Of *course* he would fly away the second he was let free.

“Soon,” she continued, “you’ll come to trust me. You’ll feel our bond stronger—and then you can fly anywhere you want, because I’ll know you’ll come back. Till then, we’ll have to make do with this.”

She turned her concentration to the leather that she’d smoothed out on the floor in front of her. Cordalles picked up her knife and made a long, precise slice close to the edge of the piece of leather. It created a thin strap.

“Looks good, right?” She held it up for Halawir to see. He dropped his eyelids, hoping she’d be smart enough to realize that he had no interest in the project. It was the end result—flying free—that interested him.

When Cordalles had finished trimming and smoothing and attaching the leather pieces, she approached him carefully. He decided to let her. The more she believed in their bond, the better chance he had at being let free. He could make his escape at Soussia, and then fly to Greenhaven on his own, once he was prepared....

Cordalles attached the anklet to him and held the end of the jess in her hand.

“Your chariot, sir,” she said, holding out her arm.

She intended her statement as a joke, but Halawir never joked. And any opportunity for her to serve him was one he would take. He hopped onto her arm and gripped it tightly with his talons, so that she could carry him out to the deck. He could feel the muscles in her arm straining under his solid weight.

Cordalles softly tiptoed out of the cabin. It opened onto one of the lower decks. She must have made sure the night watchman would be stationed elsewhere; this area of the deck was quiet and deserted.

All around them, from horizon to horizon, stars glittered madly, like droplets of water shaken off by a shivering moon. Halawir could see the tiny faraway lights vibrating in the sky.

Out in the clean ocean air on deck, he could finally breathe again. The cramped quarters had truly started to drive him crazy. He rolled his neck, stretching out his muscles. The ship heaved and pitched on the choppy waves. The salt air smelled like freedom.

Halawir's heart soared.

Cordalles fed out the leash so that Halawir could fly through the air above the boat, stretching his wings and flexing his brawny chest. Despite his resentment, he was not going to pass up the opportunity to move.

When he finally returned to her arm, Cordalles's smile was as wide as the crescent moon above them.

"See?" she whispered. "We can be good partners. We'll keep doing this, so that when we get to Soussia, we can go off, maybe do a trade of our own. Mother and Father will have to see the value of our bond after that. Then, at Greenhaven, we can show everyone how well we work together. Mother promised me that the Greencloaks would explain all the rules of a bond with a Great Beast."

He stared at her unblinkingly. If he knew anything from his time on earth, it was that rules were made so that the weak would feel safe and protected, so they could believe there was something bigger and stronger watching over them. That was a lie.

The truth, Halawir knew, was that rules were the way the clever gained power—by breaking them.

Yes, this little sea noodle had summoned him, somehow. But they were no more bound to each other than he was bound to this ship. They were simply thrown together momentarily. He would break away, smashing whatever bond she imagined existed, the first chance he got. And he would never look back.



Night after night, Cordalles snuck Halawir out and flew him.

He began to become accustomed to her little habits. If she played with her hair, he could tell that she was nervous, and he wouldn't fly so far.

And if she raised her hand above her head, he knew it meant that their time was up, and he would return to perch on her arm or shoulder.

She was teaching him to work with her, and he was teaching her that he could be trusted.

Then one morning, a shout from the rigging shook him out of his daydreams.

“Land ahead!”

Halawir flew to a little knot he'd discovered in the wooden wall. It gave him a peephole to the outdoors.

The usually calm deck was transformed. All the sailors had dropped whatever task they'd been doing and emerged into the sunlight. Boys were running around, scuttling up and down the masts, adjusting the sails, prepping the anchor, and tightening lines.

Halawir imagined that at the top of the tallest mast, one boy clung on with one hand, holding a long spyglass in the other. But with his sharp eyes, Halawir could clearly see what the boy had probably needed to use the telescope to spot. Right at the horizon line was a sliver of land—a port city.

Cordalles had told him that they'd be stopping soon to off-load some goods, make some trades, and restock their food supplies. One last stop before Greenhaven.

Everything was bustle and frenzy as they made ready to dock, but Halawir was left, forgotten, in the gloom of his prison. The sailor who usually brought his food didn't even remember to come feed him.

As the boat pulled into port, Halawir watched through the knot as the sky filled with seagulls eager to see what treats—what fish—this new vessel might have to offer. They swooped through the sky above him. Stupid, slow birds. If he was freed, Halawir knew, he could accelerate up above them, take in their positions before they had time to react, and then drop like a stone, talons outstretched, grabbing one of them tightly and tearing it from limb to limb—

He sighed and dropped down to the floor, heavy with boredom.

Gradually, the cries of the sailors thinned out. He could hear their feet running down the gangplank as the crew took to shore for a day of fun. Cordalles's parents would be off trading their goods. The ship stood empty.

This, he knew, was when she'd come for him.

The door swung open.

Cordalles stood there with a tremendous smile plastered across her face. Halawir would have laughed at how pleased with herself she appeared, except that he'd never felt so excited to see anyone in his whole life.

Despite himself, he leaped up into the air and onto her arm in greeting.

She smoothed his ruffled feathers down and even chucked him under the chin playfully.

"Are you ready?" she asked. "Mother and Father have gone. There's barely anyone left on board. I gave Zak a gold coin not to notice if we slip away for just a little while. I have a fun plan." Her gleeful smile shone in the small room.

She was wearing a long dark cloak, and she pulled it over her arm so that Halawir was concealed as they left the ship.

As soon as they reached land, she flung the garment away.

“Ta-da!” she cried happily. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. What could be better than a new green robe to wear when we visit the Greencloaks? I know the man Mother and Father always visit for new robes. We’ll find his stall and get a fine green robe to wear. Imagine the look on their faces when I show up with a new green cloak, and you on my arm, as calm as can be.”



Cordalles blended into the crowd. They were surrounded by throngs of people. Halawir balanced lightly on her arm and surveyed the bustling port of Soussia. Like every port city he’d ever seen—except during times of war—the docks were bursting with activity. Sailors and passengers flooded off leisure boats and shipping vessels.

The people were dressed in everything from dirty rags to the richest robes. The styles ranged from the severe jackets of Eura to the colorful robes of Nilo. Drivers with carts and horses jostled each other to get closest to the richest passengers with the most luggage. Porters with stooped backs took remarkably quick steps under the heavy burdens of trunks and bags. Farther inland, Halawir could see stands displaying fruits and meats and spices and teas. Halawir fed off the noise and energy of the city, but as Cordalles made her way through the winding streets, he started to feel as though something was not quite right.

He felt almost as though someone was watching them. It was a silly thing to think, because of course many eyes were on them. A cheerful old woman nodded in their direction as they passed, wishing them a good morning. A man with a sparrow spirit animal flinched when he saw them and darted away across the street. A gaggle of little kids followed Cordalles for a moment, trying to guess where she was from. There were

thousands of eyes in this city, and everyone was sizing each other up, and then moving right along.

Still, Halawir couldn't escape the feeling of paranoia that had threaded its way through him.

When he caught sight of a man in a dark tunic turning a corner up ahead, he felt as though he'd found the source of his anxiety, though he couldn't tell why. A moment later, the man disappeared from sight.

A few blocks later, he thought he spotted the man's dark tunic and close-cropped dark hair again. Of course, it could have been anyone. There were thousands of men in dark robes making their way through this port city.

Halawir tightened the grip of his talons around Cordalles's glove, determined to enjoy their outing and ignore his instincts.

Still, when Halawir and Cordalles finally reached the garment district, an area where the street opened up into a central square, he couldn't resist checking all the alley exits to make sure the man was not trailing them.

Nothing.

He breathed a sigh of relief as Cordalles, oblivious, surveyed the square. It was full of booths. Some were piled with bolts of cloth of all colors, for those who wanted to create their own clothes. Some sold delicately stitched dresses, for those with money to spare. There were puffy coats and thin stockings and everything in between.

Cordalles clearly wasn't prepared for quite so many stalls.

"I'll ask someone where we can find Lukasz," she said.

She looked around, hesitant. Halawir could tell that she wanted to find someone nonthreatening who she could approach for help. He realized that many of the people around them would look worldly and intimidating to a girl accustomed to the contained universe of a boat. There was a Zhongese soldier, a bedraggled beggar, a haughty-looking Niloan....

“She looks friendly!” Cordalles whispered at last. She started walking toward a Zhongese girl who was browsing at a stand under the colonnade that sold pretty embroidered cloths.

The girl was about Cordalles’s age but looked more mature, somehow. She was lovely, with long dark hair and tan skin, and dressed in the clothes of someone well-off. Halawir guessed that she was the daughter of one of the city’s prosperous merchants, sent out to buy something for a last-minute dinner party.

“Excuse me,” said Cordalles, tapping the girl on her shoulder. “I’m looking for the robe trader named Lukasz. Do you know where his stall is?”

The girl turned around. Up close, her face was plainer than he’d thought at first. But when her lips curled into a smile, she looked a little like a hungry cat.

“Yes, of course,” she said. Her voice was as smooth and luxurious as a silk robe. Only the slightest trace of a southern Zhongese accent hung on her words, like the faint scent of cardamom on a tablecloth at the end of a rich meal. “Everyone knows where Lukasz’s stall is; he is one of the finest craftsmen in the city. You know you’ll be getting good quality when you buy from him.”

“That’s his reputation,” said Cordalles. “It’s why my parents always like to trade with him when we’re in town.”

“Your parents must be smart people. Are they here with you?”

“Oh yes, but they’re back at the port, selling our goods. We’re sea traders.” Cordalles gestured at her sailcloth dress. “As you can see. That’s why I’m here to pick up some new robes for our season on shore.”

“Of course!” The girl seemed to remember the reason for their conversation. “I’m sorry for keeping you! It’s just always interesting to talk to people from other places. You’re lucky to be able to travel so much. I haven’t left the city in a long time.” She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, Lukasz’s stall is just off the square, on the other side. You’ll see the purple awning. Step through, follow the alley back, and—well,

it's a bit complicated if you're not familiar with the streets, I guess. Why don't I take you there? I'm not busy."

"That's so kind, thank you!" Cordalles reached out her hand, and the girl shook it. "I'm Cordalles."

"I'm Raisha. Beautiful hawk, by the way." She looked longingly at Halawir. "I've always wanted a spirit animal. He *is* your spirit animal, I assume?"

"Yes," Cordalles answered. "But he's a—" She caught herself and stopped just in time. Halawir wondered what Raisha's reaction would be if she discovered he was a Great Beast. Cordalles laughed a little. "He's an odd one. Stubborn. We're still getting used to each other."

The girl laughed too, tossing her head back so that her hair rippled and shone in the sun. "Oh, they make it sound so easy, don't they? Summon a spirit animal, have a companion for life, have your skills and your senses elevated. But it's never that simple, of course." She started walking around the edge of the square and beckoned Cordalles to come with her. "It's just this way."

Cordalles followed Raisha a few steps behind and whispered into Halawir's feathers. "She's nice, isn't she, Halawir? That's why I always love docking. You get to talk to new people, not just the same boring mast-monkeys from the ship. And everyone's friendly, too. I've seen it in port towns in Eura, Zhong, Nilo.... Wherever you go, people love to chat to traders. They love hearing news from around the world." She sighed a little wistfully. "I don't understand why Mother and Father are always so scared for me." She took a few running steps forward to catch up with Raisha, so they wouldn't lose her in the crowded plaza.

For Raisha was small and quick. She seemed excited to have the chance to break out of her everyday routine and show a stranger around her city, and it put an added energy into her step.

Cordalles was usually just as nimble on the boat. But here on land, she seemed to Halawir like a fish out of water. Her usual sure step was

more hesitant, as though her confidence was replaced with nerves—or maybe she just hadn't gotten her land legs yet.

Halawir felt for the girl, kept by her parents from learning to be comfortable mingling with new people, in new places.

He had never wanted to give in to the charged connection he felt between them, but just for a moment, he relented. He gave Cordalles a touch of his keen eyesight and quick reflexes, making it simple for her to dodge the crowds and easily follow in Raisha's footsteps.

After leaping over a stray bottle and sidestepping a man swinging a large barrel, Cordalles gave Halawir a sly smile. He could tell she realized what had happened, and was pleased.

Raisha led them across the plaza, past the purple awning, and around a few twisty streets. They turned a corner into a narrow alley, and Halawir saw that they'd reached a dead end. The alley was lined by the backs of buildings, with no vendors in sight. It ended in a low wall with a closed door in it.

"Is that his store?" Cordalles asked Raisha, slowing down as she approached the wooden door.

"Not exactly," answered a familiar voice.

They spun around.

Back at the other end of the street was a middle-aged man with light brown skin, a neatly sculpted beard, and a dark tunic. A man that Halawir recognized immediately.

Zerif.

Zerif should have felt like a friend, but everything in Halawir screamed at him to keep his distance. Because there was something strange about Zerif now, he realized. There was a spiral mark on his forehead. At first Halawir assumed it was a tattoo, but then the spiral pulsed under Zerif's skin.

Halawir shuddered, his skin prickling below his feathers.

What was that thing squirming on Zerif's brow?

“Halawir the Eagle. Great Beast and old friend, it’s so good to see you again.”

Cordalles turned to Halawir. “You know him?”

Halawir twitched his wings. It was hard, without words, to communicate that this man had been his ally in the war. This was the man that Halawir, Kovo, and Gerathon had helped to create the Bile. The man that Halawir had conspired with to release Kovo from prison.

“Oh, Halawir and I have known each other for quite some time,” said Zerif. “We’ve always been a terrific team. In fact, that’s why I was so pleased to find you two here today. I’m hoping to team up with him again. I know you won’t mind.”

Zerif pulled a black glass vial out from the pocket of his tunic. It caught the slanted rays of sunlight and fractured them into glittering rainbows. Halawir’s sharp eyes allowed him to see clearly through the bottle’s tinted glass, though—and what he saw gave him chills.

Inside the vial was a slithering dark shape, like the trail of a slug or a clot of grease suspended in dirty water. It twisted and writhed and shivered. It was just a shadow behind the dark glass, but enough to cause Halawir’s stomach to turn with an unaccustomed emotion: fear. The thing was a creature, a worm, a smudge of moldy evil. It made Halawir think of foul smoke in a clear sky.

“Hold her,” Zerif commanded.

Raisha darted over to Cordalles, grabbed her arms, and pinned them behind her back.

“What are you doing?” Cordalles screamed.

As Raisha had grabbed Cordalles’s arms, Halawir tumbled from his perch. With a few sweeps of his wings, he regained his balance and flew to the end of the leather tether, as far from Raisha as he could go.

What was Zerif’s plan? Halawir hesitated, unsure if he should attack or wait. Was Zerif a friend or an enemy? Was he there to rescue Halawir from the girl and allow him to regain his freedom?

But Halawir's eye was caught again by the bulging spiral on Zerif's forehead. There was something more going on. He had a vague memory of Kovo rambling during his years of imprisonment, talking about some sort of evil associated with this symbol, but he had never taken the ape seriously. What was it he had said ... ?

Zerif undid the clasp of his tunic, letting the cloth fall away from his torso. He was wearing nothing underneath, and his bare skin shone in the sun. He began to uncork the vial as he slowly approached Halawir.

Friend or foe? Zerif was a former ally, but this spiral whispered of some unknown danger.

Halawir's nerves sung out, and with his whole body he suddenly knew that Zerif was no longer to be trusted. He tensed, prepared to peck Zerif's eyes out the second he took another step.

But at that moment Cordalles wrenched her torso out of Raisha's grasp and threw her arm out and up with all her force.

Halawir was catapulted into the sky. He was so accustomed to the leash at this point that he waited for the moment when he reached the end of the tether.

He waited.

And it never came.

Cordalles had let go of the jess as she hurled him away from her. Freeing him.

A moment passed before he realized that his body had understood this fact long before his mind did, and that his wings were beating hard. They were propelling him away from danger.

He was high in the sky, on a sweet current of spring breeze. Below him he could see the whole city spread out like a child's puzzle, and around it, a patchwork quilt of field and forest.

Halawir the Great Beast was free at last.

He cried out, exulting. Somewhere in that maze of buildings, he knew, were Zerif and Raisha—and Cordalles, caught in a tussle.

But he had been the one they wanted, not Cordalles. Surely, he reasoned, they would let her go, now that she no longer had the thing they desired. He flew higher and higher. This was best. Sever the bond. Save himself, and render her useless. Zerif and Raisha would let her run back to her parents and the boat, and she'd return to her life like it was before.

But something caught at him, somewhere between his tail and his beak.

He craned his neck to see what it was. There was nothing there. It was an invisible stone in his belly, sinking him back down toward the earth.

She had freed him.

Cordalles had let him go.

He was flying down now, back down away from the sun and the clouds and freedom. He circled in on the city, the market, until he spotted the three tiny figures making their way out of the alley.

Zerif was walking ahead. Halawir could see by his stride that he was furious.

Behind him, Raisha led a struggling Cordalles. Her wrists were bound behind her. She pulled and resisted, trying to break free. Raisha yanked her roughly, and Cordalles tripped and fell to her knees.

That was it. He wouldn't stand for this.

Halawir dove. He plummeted from the sky like a falling star, heading straight at Raisha. He grabbed her long hair in his talons, startling her, and pulled with all his might.

"Agh!" she shrieked, stumbling backward. "Let go! Let go!" She brought her free hand up to try to yank Halawir away, and he tore mercilessly into her hand with his beak, drawing blood.

It worked. Raisha screamed and doubled over, her hand clutched to her chest, releasing Cordalles.

Cordalles immediately took off at a sprint, and Halawir gave her every last ounce of agility and fleetness that he could.

Zerif lunged at her. She darted out of his grasp and zigzagged down the alley, Zerif close on her heels, but Cordalles had a head start and the speed of an eagle driving her forward.

Halawir stayed behind. He pulled on Raisha's hair again, dragging her back. He could hear as strands ripped from her head, but mercy was not a thing that Halawir often found in his heart. He yanked again, only half his attention on the struggling girl. He was watching Cordalles run: As soon as Cordalles got far enough away, Halawir would release Raisha and make his own escape.

But suddenly he realized Zerif was no longer chasing Cordalles.

Where was he?

Halawir saw the movement a moment too late.

Zerif was next to them, and he sprang forward and wrapped his thick arm around Halawir's wings, pinning them to his sides.

With his free hand, he still held the vial.

"Quit your crying," he hissed at Raisha, who was screaming and grabbing at her hair. She quieted. Halawir tightened his feet in her hair even more, scratching her skull. She whimpered, but bit down on her lip to keep from crying out again.

Halawir was trapped. But at least the two of them were occupied, giving Cordalles a chance to get away. He hoped she kept running as fast and as long as she could, straight to the boat, never looking back.

"Hold still now," Zerif muttered. "First you must submit, but soon you'll have some of that power you love so very much."

He tipped the vial over, dropping the wriggling worm onto Halawir's chest. The parasite squirmed underneath Halawir's tawny feathers. He tried to crane his neck down to peck the thing out, but it moved too quickly. Once it reached his skin, it bit into him. Then it was under his skin. It wriggled and squirmed. He could feel it writhing its way up toward his head.

Halawir let out a tremendous cry.

Zerif dropped him at last. Freedom! Halawir let go of his grip on Raisha and spread his wings to take off.

But then he felt the thing curl up inside his forehead. All of the fight seeped out of him. He no longer felt his fierce fighting spirit. He relaxed his wings.

Footsteps pounded at the edges of his attention.

“Halawir!”

It was Cordalles. Running back for him once she heard his cry. He wanted to go to her, but a strange fog was drifting into his mind. He sank down and folded his wings onto his back as whispering voices drowned out his own instincts. He calmly sat and watched as Zerif grabbed Cordalles by the neck. He took another dark vial out from his tunic—only to have it knocked out of his hand.

“Let her go, Zerif.”

In a small, shadowed corner of his mind, Halawir noted that a figure in a crimson cloak and an odd white mask had appeared and was trying to get between Zerif and Cordalles.

Or was he hallucinating? The red cloak and the black tunic swirled together like nightmare fireworks.

Who was the masked figure? Was he going to save Cordalles?

Halawir would never know. The last thing he saw before the fog overcame him was Raisha giving the masked man a shove, and the look of horror on Cordalles’s face as Zerif closed in.



RUMFUSS





THE TRUNSWICK BLADE

By Nick Eliopulos

DEVIN TRUNSWICK WAS RUNNING OUT OF THINGS to sell.

He'd sold his jacket to a traveling merchant outside Trynsfield. It had been a fine jacket once, with polished buttons and a neat velvet trim. After months on the road, however, it had become tattered and travel stained. When Devin finally sold it, he barely got enough coin for a week's worth of food.

He'd sold his belt buckle to a shopkeeper in Samis. A gleaming silver rectangle engraved with the image of a sleek panther, it had been a gift

from his father and, briefly, his most prized possession. Eventually, it served only to remind him of his failures. He couldn't bear to look at it, and so he sold it for a fraction of its worth.

The coin from that sale hadn't lasted him long. Devin had never been very good with money. He'd never had to worry about it before.

Lately it was near the top of a long list of worries.

"You're charging *how much*?" he said now, fuming, as he stood in the common room of a roadside inn.

"You heard me," the innkeeper responded, not bothering to look up as he wiped a dirty counter with a dirty rag. "So then, do you want a room or not?"

The man gazed meaningfully out the open doorway, where rain came down in heavy sheets. Devin had made it indoors just before the downpour started. He had hardly believed his luck, to have stumbled upon shelter just as the storm descended.

Now his luck appeared to be returning to form.

"Listen," Devin said through a clenched jaw. "I'm not some simpleminded rube with a head full of rotten teeth. I know what a cot and a meal is worth." He cast a scornful glance about the dimly lit room. A few scattered customers sat about, staring into their mugs or the fire and pretending not to notice the argument.

"It's my inn," the innkeeper said sourly. "A bed here's worth precisely what I charge and no less, boy."

Devin huffed. "I'm no *boy*."

The innkeeper's eyes roamed down Devin and up again, taking in his threadbare traveling cloak, filthy hands, and worn-out boots. "I know exactly what you are," the man snarled. "You're just another worthless urchin bothering the decent and hardworking folk of Eura. Well, you'll get no charity from me ... *boy*."

Heat rushed to Devin's cheeks and a sharp retort leaped to his tongue, but he swallowed it back. "I'm not asking for charity," he said after a moment. He pulled a ring from his finger. It was only pewter—he'd long

ago sold his more valuable jewelry—but it was fashionable and well made, shaped liked a circle of interlocking tree branches.

He slapped it onto the bar. “Surely that’s worth a cot for the night and provisions for the road, too.”

The innkeeper barely looked at it. “I don’t barter,” he said. “Coin only.” Then he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I might barter for the sword.”

Devin stiffened. “My sword?”

“Aye.”

There was a moment of silence as Devin seemed to consider it. Then he said, “You have a fine eye, friend innkeeper.” He spoke the words smoothly, but his eyes had gone fierce. “This sword is the workmanship of the finest craftsman in Eura—the queen’s own blacksmith.” He caressed the sword’s hilt, the only part of the weapon visible while it was sheathed at his hip. “The hilt is grooved for comfort and ease of use. You could swing it three hundred times and never get a blister.” He pulled the sword partway out of the scabbard, and a high metal sound rang out. “The steel is flawless, forged from Trunswick iron with charcoal made from Trunswick timber. The blade is perfectly balanced and sharp enough to cut bone.” He slammed the weapon back into its scabbard and jabbed his finger in the innkeeper’s face. “You aren’t fit to touch this sword,” he snarled. “It is worth more than this entire filthy, damp, lice-ridden hovel.”

The innkeeper didn’t flinch away from Devin’s finger or from the spittle that flew from Devin’s mouth.

“Brutis,” he said calmly. “See the boy out, would you?”

A chair scraped heavily against the wood floor, and Devin turned to see the man by the fire lumber to his feet. Brutis was huge, easily four hands taller than Devin, and his arms were thick with muscle.

“Er,” Devin said to the innkeeper, dropping his finger. “Perhaps we could start over?”

But the innkeeper had resumed running his dirty rag over the dirty countertop, and he didn't even bother to look up as Devin was dragged away and hurled outside, landing on his back in the mud with an audible plop.



Devin had always had a problem with his temper. He was trying to be better about it. He had a new trick: Every time he felt his cheeks grow hot, he would clamp his jaw shut and count slowly to ten before saying or doing anything.

That was the idea, anyway. But his mouth tended to be just a little faster than his brain.

The rain had stopped after only a quarter hour, but in that time he'd been thoroughly soaked. On the bright side, the water had been pleasantly warm. Devin couldn't remember the last time he'd had a proper bath, and he took the opportunity to rub at his hands and face, rinsing the dirt away.

In the aftermath of the rain, however, Devin knew true misery. His traveling cloak was sopping, and it hung heavily from his shoulders, a dead weight that kept his back from drying. His boots squelched with each step, and he could feel new blisters forming atop the old. His clothing clung to him, chafing in places he'd rather not chafe, and altogether his gear felt twenty pounds heavier than it had when dry.

Still, he trudged on, walking through the storm and through the muck and gnats and mugginess that came in its wake. He walked through the headache brought on by the shrill cry of a bird of prey, circling high above; he walked until the sun set and night descended and he was too tired to continue. Then he set up camp among the trees, just off the road.

He started a small fire, hung his cloak from a low branch to dry, and took stock of his meager possessions. It would be boiled oats for dinner. Again.

While he waited for water to boil in his battered tin pot, he sat upon a fallen trunk and stretched his legs. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire ... and the rustling of an animal approaching through the fallen leaves.

Devin remained seated but twisted a bit to get a look at the woods around him. He was in the middle of a heavily forested area—acre upon acre of trees, with a single dirt road leading through it.

He'd finally crossed into Trunswick land earlier that day. Everything he could see, everything for miles around, belonged to his father.

Except perhaps for the fiercely independent creature watching him from the shadows.

"I see you," Devin said, addressing the glowing yellow eyes. "Come on out. It's almost time for dinner."

But the cat would not be hurried.

Eventually, at her own leisurely pace, a small black cat slinked from the trees and into the light of the fire. For a moment, he was reminded of his spirit animal, Elda, but he forced the thought away. Like so many others, Devin had lost his spirit animal bond in the aftermath of the war.

The cat meowed plaintively, sitting in the dirt a few paces away.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "I'm working on it. Are all Greencloaks so impatient?"

The cat meowed again in response to Devin's favorite joke. When he'd first seen her, she had been traveling with a group of Greencloaks. But they had moved on, and the cat had struck out on her own ... though she had a tendency to pop up each night when Devin was cooking.

He'd heard them call her Kunaya, but he called her Yaya for short.

"Careful, now," he said as he poured a small bit of oatmeal onto the ground for her. "It's hot."

Kunaya, as always, appeared initially wary, stepping forward slowly, sniffing as she walked. Eventually she decided the risk was worth the reward and darted forward, tucking happily into the boiled oats.

"It's a rare man who earns the trust of a cat," said an unfamiliar voice.

Devin stood, turning toward the sound as Kunaya bolted in the other direction, her meal unfinished. He put his hand to his sword but didn't draw it as a girl stepped out from the trees, leading a horse by the reins. She looked a little younger than him, but her bearing was confident, and she spoke with the poise of the educated upper class. "Cats are awfully particular about who they cozy up to."

"Maybe," Devin said, eyeing the girl warily. "Or maybe they just have keen noses and follow the food."

She shrugged. "Maybe a little of both. But I'm sore from riding and your fire looks inviting, so I'm going to assume that your willingness to share food with an animal is a sign that you're trustworthy. Now, is there room at your fireside for a fellow traveler?" When Devin took a moment to consider it, she added, "I have bacon to contribute."

Devin's mouth watered at the mere mention of bacon, but he tried not to let his excitement show. He simply nodded and gestured for the girl to pull up a log. "I suppose the cat would like that," he said.

The girl tied her horse to a tree and plopped down, grunting at the ache in her muscles. Devin tucked his chin down to hide his smile but kept his eyes on her. Her long hair was newly tangled, but it was a healthy, glossy black. She smelled of an odd mix of perfume and horse, and her riding clothes were a little too fashionable to be comfortable.

"What's so funny?" the girl asked.

"Nothing," Devin said. "You just remind me of myself. First time on the road?"

She gave him a suspicious look as she pulled a sheet of oiled parchment from her satchel, unrolling it to reveal several thick cuts of raw bacon. "I've traveled a lot," she said, a little defensively. She handed him two strips, which he placed on the pan. When they began to sizzle, she turned her eyes back to Devin. "But I've never gone quite so far by myself. How much farther to Trunswick?"

"You're on Trunswick land already," Devin answered. "If you ride at a fair clip, you could reach town in a few hours."

“That’s a relief,” she said. “I’d hate to miss the celebration.”

Devin gave her a confused look. “Celebration?”

She smiled like a child with a secret. “Haven’t you heard? It’s all anyone’s talking about.”

“I’ve been keeping to myself recently,” Devin said, and he flipped the bacon with a stick.

“Well, it’s big news,” she said. “Apparently the Earl of Trunswick’s son has summoned a spirit animal. And not just any spirit animal—”

“Really?” Devin interrupted, his cheeks growing hot. “That’s big news? You’re months behind. Everyone knows Devin Trunswick summoned a black wildcat.”

“I know *that’s* old news,” the girl said smugly. “I’m talking about the *other* Trunswick boy.”

Devin sat in stunned silence for a long moment. He could scarcely make sense of the girl’s words.

“Dawson?” he said at last, his voice small. “Dawson summoned a spirit animal?”

“Dawson Trunswick, that’s right. And there’s more,” she said. “He summoned a Great Beast.”

“Just like ... just like Conor,” Devin muttered to himself. “Of course. Of course it would happen like that.” His stomach twisted. “Fa—the Earl of Trunswick must be so pleased.”

“By all accounts, yes,” the girl replied, giving a leisurely shrug. “The way I hear it, the earl’s popularity suffered during the war. When the Greencloaks came to Trunswick, many of the townsfolk sided with them. Tensions have been high ever since—but with a Great Beast in the family, the Trunswicks have the respect of the people again. Talk of rebellion is dying out. Ah, the bacon ... ?”

Devin turned to see the bacon was beginning to char. Acrid smoke hovered low in the pan. “Curse it,” he said, grabbing the handle.

“It’s no reason to get upset,” she said. “I like it crispy. Anyway, the earl is having a celebration for his son. Everyone who’s anyone will be

there ... provided you bring a grand enough gift to honor Dawson. My father sent me with enough spices to make my horse walk lopsided.”

She lapsed into silence as Devin served up the bacon. It was thoroughly ruined, bitter and brittle on his tongue, but Devin ate it slowly, grinding it to gristle and ash in his teeth.

The silence was broken by the shrill cry of a bird. It sounded to Devin’s ears like the same hawk or eagle he had heard throughout the day, but he knew those birds were not active at night.

The girl seemed startled by the sound. “I’d better be on my way,” she said lightly as she got to her feet. “Big day tomorrow. I can’t believe I’m meeting Dawson Trunswick!”

“Yeah, how about that,” Devin said sourly.

“Thanks for the hospitality,” she said. “I’m Raisha, by the way. See you around?”

She gave a small curtsy and was gone.



Devin tried to put Dawson out of his mind during the long day that followed. The thought of his brother with a spirit animal, however, was like a loose tooth he couldn’t stop wiggling. It was easy to picture Dawson enjoying the status and adoration that having a spirit animal would bring—easy because Devin had imagined that life for himself for so long.

But things hadn’t worked out that way.

Making his mood fouler was the fact that traffic on the dirt road he traveled was unusually heavy. Before the sun had even climbed above the trees, Devin was overtaken by four separate horse-drawn carriages, all headed in the direction of town. The dirt road was narrow enough that he was forced to step into the brush each time to avoid getting run over. Most of the carriages didn’t seem to care whether or not he was

trampled; they didn't slow down, and made no real effort to make room for him.

Each time he was forced off the path, he bit his tongue and counted to ten in his head.

As Devin walked, the road widened and the trees grew less dense, the forest giving way first to rolling hills and then to the great expanse of farmland that surrounded the town for miles on all sides. But there were no shepherds tending their flocks and no farmhands working those lands. The entire countryside was empty. Devin was certain the people had set their work aside to visit Trunswick, as they did for holidays, market days, and Nectar Ceremonies.

He tried to forget about the humiliation of his own ceremony, but it hung around him like the cloud of midges he had been swatting at for the better part of the day.

And the memories came flooding back to him as he entered the town and found its dirt roads crowded to capacity and beyond. He smiled smugly as he passed the same carriages that had overtaken him hours before. They stood still now, a long line of them unable to make their way through the teeming crowds.

It was an oddly subdued affair. There were market stalls and musicians, but no dancing. The traders kept their voices low rather than crowing about their bargains, and soldiers wearing the traditional Trunswick blue glared from open doorways.

No one spared him a glance as he made his way through the crowd. He fit in all too well. In a perfect world, he mused, he would have been able to bathe before approaching his family's manor. He would have been able to trade his travel-stained clothes for finery, and run a comb through his tangled brown hair.

But he had not lived in a perfect world for some time.

As if to underscore the point, Devin noticed something then that made him deeply uneasy. At the very center of town, upon the stage where he had once drunk the Nectar to no effect, a woman was being tortured.

She was hunched over at an awkward angle, her head and hands locked between wooden boards, her bare feet chained to the stage. Devin had heard this form of punishment referred to as “the stocks.” It was deeply uncomfortable, used to punish and publicly shame criminals, sometimes for many days and nights in a row. The woman’s face was pink from exposure to the sun, and her lips were dry and cracked. But her eyes were defiant, as if daring the crowd to jeer.

No one did. Aside from the guard standing beside her, the people of Trunswick gave the stage a wide berth.

Devin picked up his pace.

The closer he got to the manor, the richer the crowd appeared. Those clustered about the manor’s gates were all smartly dressed, their arms laden with gifts as they awaited entry.

Devin walked right up to the guard at the gate. Instead of wielding a sword or pike, the man held a quill poised above a vellum scroll.

“Please declare your gift,” the guard said without looking up.

Devin grinned. “Oh, I promise Dawson will be happy with my *presence*.” He chortled at his own joke.

“I haven’t heard that joke in five whole minutes,” the guard grouched. “There’s no admittance to the grounds without acceptable tribute.”

Devin huffed imperiously. “I live here, you oaf.”

The guard startled, finally looking up from his scroll. “Devin Trunswick?” he asked, uncertain.

Devin smiled and puffed out his chest. “Good. I’d hate to think a few months away and a bit of road dust was enough to be forgotten.”

“Oh, I remember you,” the guard said acidly. “You’re the one who put a spiked caltrop in my chair.”

Devin deflated a bit. “I’m almost certain that was Dawson,” he lied.

“I have my orders,” the guard said. Then he softened. “The earl, he ... left very specific instructions about who to let in today. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“For what it’s worth,” Devin said, “I’m sorry, too.”

Then he kicked him in the shin, hard. The guard toppled to the ground, and before any of the onlookers could react, Devin had ducked through the gate and onto the manor grounds.

There was a smaller group gathered in the courtyard, all lavishly dressed in the latest fashions. With no hope of blending in, he wove and dodged among them, ignoring their exclamations of surprise and distaste. He stepped on the trail of one woman's gown and nearly knocked a glass from a man's grip. Finally he made it into the manor itself, where the grand hall was empty.

The ceiling arched high above him in a perfect dome, layered in vibrant shades of blue and pink and orange in an uncanny approximation of the sky at dawn. The painted clouds were brilliant white at their center but ringed in shining gold leaf, and the hundred lit candles set about the hundred ledges and crevices of the circular room made the colors flicker as if alive.

He had seen this room every day for years. But today, for the first time, it took his breath away.

"Let me guess," said a voice behind him. "It's smaller than you remembered, right? That's what they always say..."

Devin turned to see Dawson standing in the doorway. His brother's expression was blank, and he had his arms crossed in front of him as he lingered on the threshold.

"Well, they're wrong," Devin said. "It's so big. I ... I don't think I had any idea how *rich* we are."

Dawson clucked his tongue. "And you traded all of this for a life of adventure?" he said. Then his face lit up with his familiar smile—big and goofy and unselfconscious. "You had the right idea. Take me with you!"

Devin laughed and opened his arms, and his little brother crossed the room quickly and embraced him.

"I was worried about you," Dawson said when they pulled apart.

Devin swatted at the air. "Nothing to worry about. I can take care of myself. Didn't you get my letters?"

“Letters?” Dawson asked, and before Devin could answer, he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end and a shiver down his spine.

He had always had an uncanny ability to sense when their father was nearby.

“Devin!” The earl barked the name, short and sharp. It sounded like a curse.

Devin turned to face his father, who stepped into the room with an armed guard at each elbow. They moved briskly, stirring up a breeze that extinguished the nearest candles, shrouding them in shadow.

“You’ve always been thick, boy, but really, take a hint.”

“Father ...” Devin said, and the earl’s eyes flashed with anger.

“*You*,” he seethed, “will address me as Lord Trunswick. On your way out the door.”

Devin felt the words like a blow to the stomach. He didn’t know what to say, how to react, or even where to look. So he looked at the ground.

“That’s uncalled for, Father,” Dawson said. He gripped Devin by the elbow. “It’s my party. I want Devin here for it.”

Devin looked up at his brother—and realized that Dawson was taller than him now. He marveled at the resolve in Dawson’s eyes as he stared down their father.

When had Dawson grown so bold?

“At least tell me you’ve brought Dawson some gift as tribute,” the earl said to Devin. He gestured to a table weighed down with everything from bolts of silk and jewels to vials of exotic spices.

Devin tried to mimic the resolve in Dawson’s expression. “I don’t have anything,” he said, careful to keep his voice level. “When I didn’t hear from you, I had to sell everything I had just to get back here.”

His father sniffed imperiously. “The sword should do nicely, I think.”

Devin bristled. “It’s my sword.”

“It’s the *Trunswick* sword,” the earl countered. “It’s only fitting—”

Devin drew the blade then, and the shrill sound of metal rang out like a threat.

“I’m not sure you’ll be happy with it, *Lord Trunswick*,” Devin said. “Since it’s not perfect.”

He held up the blade so that it caught the light of the candles. It was broken to half its original length, ending in an ugly jagged edge.

“Unbelievable.” His father glared at him. “Tell me, did you accomplish *anything* in your time as a Conqueror?” He covered his eyes with his hand. “Do you realize we had to abduct some ridiculous sheep woman and hold her hostage because you couldn’t get your hands on a single talisman? You ruined this family, Devin.”

“That’s enough!” Dawson cried. He stepped between them, threw back his shoulders, and held out his arm dramatically. There was a flash of light ... and Devin saw a squat, bristle-haired animal snorting and wheezing at his brother’s feet.

It was Rumfuss the Boar.

Devin laughed, deep and loud.

“Rumfuss? You summoned Rumfuss?”

Uncertainty flickered across Dawson’s face. “What’s so funny?”

Devin cleared his throat. “Nothing, nothing. Don’t mind me. It’s just that when I heard you’d summoned a Great Beast, I’d imagined something a bit more ... majestic. Not ... you know ... ”

Rumfuss and Dawson both huffed in agitation.

“Rumfuss is a Great Beast,” Dawson said. “He is powerful and ... and ... ”

“And put an apple in his mouth and dinner is served!” Devin said. “You know what the Conquerors used to call Rumfuss? The great bore.” He cackled. “Get it? *Bore*?”

The spirit animal let out a deep rumbling growl—and then he charged.

Rumfuss had once been much larger. Like the other reborn Great Beasts, his new form was much closer to the size of a natural animal, and so he was only slightly larger than an average boar.

But an average boar is thickly built and vicious, with razor-sharp tusks capable of gutting a person in a single glancing blow.

Devin knew this. And seeing the two-hundred-pound animal bearing down on him, he shrieked, leaping back and bringing his hands up to protect his body. For all the good that would do. Those tusks would cut right through his fingers....

It was a long several moments before Devin realized the boar was gone. He lowered his hands and opened his eyes, which he had squeezed shut, and confirmed it: His brother had recalled his spirit animal and now stood before him, his fists clenched and his eyes furious.

“You were right, Father,” Dawson said coldly. “I think it’s best if Devin left now.”

“Now hold on,” Devin said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Guards!” the earl barked. “Do as my son says.” He leveled his steely gaze at Devin. “And throw this useless fool out on his ear.”



Devin knew he’d messed up.

It was a familiar feeling, but no more comfortable for that fact. It always happened the same way—he got angry, and then he got mean. And then when the anger eventually faded, he found himself regretting what he’d said and done.

He’d found an inn that was crowded enough to allow him to blend in, but empty enough that he could have a table to himself. He sat alone, nursing a mug of chocolate he’d bought with one of his few remaining coins, and he wondered where he should go now.

He couldn’t stay in Trunswick. With dark humor he realized he couldn’t afford the earl’s taxes.

As Devin gazed out the window onto the darkening street, he saw a familiar face—one he would never have expected to see here. He

scrambled up from the table and ran outside as the cloaked figure turned a corner at the end of the street.

The crowds were just as thick as they'd been during the day, slowing Devin down. By the time he made it to the corner, all he found was an empty alleyway.

He cursed. Then he turned around, and Karmo was standing there, blocking Devin's exit from the alleyway.

Devin and Karmo had been partners during the war. They had both been recruited by a man named Zerif, a high-ranking Conqueror with a vicious streak. But they'd failed on their first mission, and Zerif had abandoned them, leaving them imprisoned in a castle to the north.

"Karmo." Devin smiled. "I'm so glad to see you."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Karmo said—and then he attacked.

Karmo launched himself at Devin. The Niloan boy got in a punch—a solid right hook to the temple—before Devin could even get his hands up.

Devin's head snapped back, but he rolled with the blow, twisting around and grabbing Karmo's wrists in an iron grip.

Karmo was fast, but Devin was bigger and stronger. He squeezed.

Then he felt a sudden tingling pain in his palms, as if he'd been shocked. He pulled his hands back, and Karmo took the opportunity to land a head butt.

Devin saw stars. He brought his hands up to his aching face. "Just ... just hold on," he said.

"That isn't half of what you've got coming," Karmo said.

"Really?" Devin asked. "I thought we left on good terms...."

"*You* left!" Karmo countered. "You left me in prison, you idiot!"

"My dad bailed me out," Devin said. "And threw me right back into the war. Honestly, even if I could have brought you with me, I figured you were better off."

Karmo glared at him.

“As prisons go, it wasn’t that bad,” Devin insisted.

“I had to listen to MacDonnell coo at his rabbit for months, Devin. He made his musicians compose a heroic ballad about that rabbit, and he’d sing it wherever he went. It’s been stuck in my head for months...” Karmo shuddered.

“I’m sorry,” Devin said.

Karmo seemed surprised by that. “You’re sorry?”

“Yeah.”

Karmo thought about it. He shrugged. “Okay.” He paused. “I’m sorry I hit you. I was angry.”

“You should try counting to ten,” Devin offered. He rubbed his aching face. “What are you even doing here?”

“You’re not going to like it,” Karmo admitted with a sigh. He leaned against the alley wall. “I’m here for Dawson. Zerif’s hunting Great Beasts. He’s found some way to ... to steal spirit animals. Not just carry away, but sever the bond completely.”

Devin’s blood went cold. “Is he here? Now?”

“I don’t know.” Karmo slapped the wall. “But your father may as well have sent an invitation with as much noise as he’s been making about Dawson’s summoning. I’m working with ... someone who has a bit of a grudge against Zerif. And since you and I have history, I thought I had the best chance of warning your father. He laughed in my face and threw me out.” He smiled. “But hey! Now you’re here. You can get a warning to your brother. Better yet, get him out of town. I can take him someplace safe.”

“That ... might be a problem. I’m not exactly welcome back home.”

Karmo sighed dramatically. “Great. Of course. I’m no better off than I was before you showed up.”

“Not true,” Devin said. “I can get to Dawson. I just need to get past my father’s guards.”

Karmo shook his head. “From what I’ve seen, they’re loyal to him. And that’s lucky for him, because the rest of the town hates his guts.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah,” Karmo said. “I’ve been here for two days, and I’ve overheard a lot. You know the woman in the stocks? She’s there for suggesting your father should be put on trial for war crimes. She’s not the only one who thinks so, but she said it the loudest.”

“I didn’t realize,” Devin said softly. “I thought Dawson summoning a Great Beast had brought everyone together.”

Karmo scoffed. “Your dad would like to think so. But the hurt runs too deep. He openly supported an invading army and imprisoned anyone who spoke out against it. Now he’s pretending like it never happened—but he’s nervous, so he brought on dozens of former Conquerors to beef up his personal guard. People have tried withholding taxes in protest, but he just sends the guards around to threaten them, which makes more people withhold taxes....”

“My father is a bully,” Devin said, realizing the truth as he voiced it. How had he never thought of it in those terms before?

After all, Devin had been called a bully his entire life. And he wasn’t proud to admit it, but it had often been true. He’d pushed other kids around, teased them, threatened them.

No wonder. He’d learned that behavior from his father. But the Earl of Trunswick was bullying hundreds of people all at once.

“I think I’ve got an idea for how we can get to Dawson,” Devin said.

“You *think*?”

“Well, I definitely have an idea.” Devin rubbed his chin. “I’m just not sure if it’s a good one or not.”



“It’s a bad plan,” Karmo said as they walked together through the crowd.

“A very bad plan.”

“Maybe,” Devin said. “But I know a thing or two about anger, and I think it’ll work.”

“Devin.” Karmo gripped his shoulder. “Think it through, man. Once you push this boulder, it is rolling all the way downhill. I can try to tilt it one way or the other, but we won’t be able to stop it again if you change your mind.”

“As long as the Earl of Trunswick is in that boulder’s path, I don’t care.”

Karmo bit his lip, searching Devin’s face as if for any sign of hesitation. Finding none, he shrugged. “Whatever you say. I’ll be ready to move.”

Devin nodded and made his way to the wooden platform he’d seen earlier in the day. The same woman was still in the stocks. She had a faraway look in her eyes and didn’t even seem to notice when Devin clambered his way onto the platform.

The guard noticed, however. He stepped forward immediately, raising his pike as if to ward Devin off.

“Stand down,” Devin said, and though he looked nothing like a noble, he sounded the part. “I’m here on behalf of my father, the earl.”

The guard looked uncertain, but nodded and took a step back.

Devin stepped to the woman. He held a waterskin to her lips and allowed her to drink her fill.

“I’m going to get you out of there,” Devin whispered as she drank. “Hold on for just another few minutes.”

The woman nodded as best she could, eyes sharp again, refreshed by the water.

He stepped to the front of the stage.

“People of Trunswick!” he called out, and whatever eyes weren’t already on him turned his way almost immediately. “My name is Devin. I’m the firstborn son of the earl, and I’m here on behalf of my father to welcome you in this time of celebration.”

The crowd clapped politely, and Devin paused for a moment before continuing.

“He’d come here himself, but he hates to get mud on his shoes.” Devin forced a chuckle, and there was an awkward echo of forced chuckles scattered throughout the crowd. “There certainly is a lot of mud down here, isn’t there?” he said to the guard, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Anyway,” he continued. “My father is a great and generous man. On the occasion of my own bonding, he gifted me with a gleaming belt buckle of purest silver. It was worth enough to feed a family for a month. I felt so grateful to him, knowing how many people were out there in the world starving while I wore silver around my waist.

“He liked to joke that his mastiffs ate better than the townsfolk.

“But his generosity doesn’t extend just to his family. No indeed. Did you know that he’s found work for the Conquerors? That’s right. They lost the war, but the earl has seen fit to hire dozens of them to act as his personal guard. Didn’t you notice how many soldiers have been in town lately? Didn’t you notice how they look at Eurans with disdain? It’s nothing personal. It’s just that they were our enemies in a war until recently. I’m sure they don’t hold any grudges, though.”

Devin heard gasps from the crowd as he spoke, and could practically feel the heat as their gazes turned fiery. Still he pressed on.

“It’s important to let grudges go if we’re to heal in the aftermath of the war,” Devin said. “I saw firsthand how my father was forced to lock up the people who disagreed with him when he first brought the Conquerors to Trunswick. I’m sure it was very upsetting for those of you who were temporarily jailed—or those whose loved ones were. But in hindsight, I think we can all agree that my father did the right thing and prevented anyone from getting hurt for what they believed in.”

Devin grinned his most annoying grin. His father had once threatened to lock him in the Howling House for smiling at him this way.

“My father’s always done a good job of looking out for the people of this town. That’s why he’s raising taxes later this year—it’s only at a great expense that he’s able to keep you all safe by paying, housing, and

feeding former Conquerors to act as his own personal peacekeeping force.

“In conclusion, I think we can all agree that my father is a great and generous man.”



It worked almost too well.

Devin had whipped the crowd into a frothing, frenzied fury. Farmers had grabbed their pitchforks. Craftspeople had taken up torches. The guards who'd been left in town overnight were doing their best to contain the mob, but they were fighting a losing battle and they knew it.

By the time Devin was halfway up the hill to the manor, the guards had ignited a massive signal pyre in the town below—a sign that they needed reinforcements from the manor.

Devin slunk into the trees. It would slow his progress somewhat, but it would also keep him from being spotted by those reinforcements on their way into town. Soon he saw their torches on the other side of the trees, and he knew his plan had worked. The manor was unguarded, and Devin strolled right through the gate and into the front door as if he still belonged there.

He found his brother on the roof, sitting atop the sloping expanse of shingles just outside Dawson's bedroom window.

When they'd been little boys, they'd made a thorough search of the manor for secret, out-of-the-way places where they could hide from their father on days when his temper threatened to explode. He'd found them in the broom closets; he'd found them in the hedges. But given the earl's fear of heights, it never occurred to him to stick his head out a third-story window to look for them here. And even if he saw them, he'd never step onto the roof to come after them.

This hidden patch of roof had quickly become their favorite spot.

“You could have moved into my bedroom,” Devin said as he clambered out Dawson’s window. “It’s bigger.”

Dawson didn’t look up or startle at his voice. He simply shook his head. “I wouldn’t let anyone touch your room.”

Devin smiled as he sat beside his brother. “You’re standing up to him. Not letting him push you around.” He put a hand on Dawson’s shoulder. “I was worried, leaving you here with him. But you know how to handle him, don’t you?”

Dawson didn’t say anything. They sat together for a minute, sharing what Devin considered a comfortable silence.

Then he saw that his brother was silently crying.

“Hey, is this about what I said before? About Rumfuss?” he asked. “I’m sorry, Dawson. I didn’t mean it.”

Dawson shook his head, wiped at his cheeks, sniffed. “It’s not that. It’s ... After you left, Father and that horrible man with the beard—”

“Zerif,” Devin clarified.

Dawson nodded. “They abducted Conor’s mother. Held her prisoner. You heard him bragging about it.” He took a shaky breath. “I helped them. I helped them take her, and then I went to Conor and told him that he had to hand over the talisman or ... or else.”

“That’s not your fault,” Devin said.

“Isn’t it?” Dawson turned to look at him, and his eyes shone with new tears. “I could have refused. I could have saved her. Snuck her out. But I was too afraid.”

Devin looked out over the dark manor grounds. He saw torches in the distance, moving up the hill from town. “I never should have left,” Devin said.

Dawson sniffled. “It’s okay, you—”

“Let me finish. I never should have left without you.” Devin stood, balancing on the sloping rooftop.

“Careful,” Dawson warned.

“Don’t worry, I’m as nimble as a wildcat,” Devin said. “But I can’t stay here, Dawson. And I don’t think you should stay here either.”

You’re in danger, he didn’t say. But maybe he wouldn’t have to. Maybe Dawson didn’t need to know that he’d been targeted by Zerif.

His little brother looked up at him. “Are you serious?”

“Serious as an angry mob,” Devin said, looking over his shoulder. “We need to leave tonight. Now. I have a friend who can help us get out of town.”

A huge smile split Dawson’s face. “You have a friend?”

“Yeah, well, he did punch me earlier, if that makes it easier to believe.” Devin grinned. “Now pack your things. And, uh, maybe grab some jewelry, too. It turns out a life of adventure isn’t cheap.”



Devin left Dawson to pack. He had one more thing to take care of before he could leave, and he set his face in grim determination as he hurried down the hallway.

His grimness fell away, however, when he turned a corner and nearly collided with a familiar girl.

“Raisha?” he said, surprised. “What are—?” The girl was still dressed in her fine riding clothes, but she’d combed the tangles from her hair and washed the road dust from her face. Her tan skin and dark hair glowed warm and lovely in the torchlight.

A flicker of surprise lit her features, but it was fleeting, replaced with a playful roll of her eyes. “Thank goodness you’re here. I’m so lost!” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Where is the third-floor parlor room?”

“Uh, back there,” Devin said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. “Just past Dawson’s room.”

“Dawson’s room.” Raisha flashed her teeth in a wide smile. “Thanks.”

Devin blinked after her as she continued up the hallway. He remembered she'd said she was coming with gifts from her merchant father. But why wasn't she more surprised to see him here? Had she actually known who he was all along?

He shoved the question aside. At the moment he decided he had more important things to dwell on.

He set his scowl back in place and walked downstairs to confront his father.



Devin found the earl in their opulent dining room. He was seated at the far end of a long table, which had been carved from a single massive oak and polished to a shine. There was room at the table for thirty. But tonight, his father dined with only a single guest.

It was Zerif.

“What’s *he* doing here?”

“He was invited,” the earl said, getting to his feet. “Unlike you.”

Devin noticed his father’s spirit animal curled up alone in the corner. The lynx’s face was buried in its paws. He’d never seen it so sedate.

Zerif smiled languorously. His beard was as immaculate as ever, but there was a strange spiral of raised flesh upon his forehead, like a scar or a brand.

“Don’t trust him.” Devin gripped the hilt of his sword. “Father—Lord Trunswick—*please*. You have to listen. Zerif is targeting the Great Beasts. He’s here for Dawson!”

Zerif laughed, deep and long. The sound set Devin’s nerves on edge.

Devin drew his sword. The sound of ringing metal brought both men’s eyes to the broken blade.

“Oh my, Lord Trunswick. Is that the family sword?” Zerif sneered at Devin’s father. “You really have fallen on hard times, haven’t you?”

The earl stiffened at the comment.

“Hard times?” Devin echoed.

He saw it then, and he felt like a fool for failing to see it before. He saw it in his father’s rumpled suit with the unstarched collar. In the lynx’s bowl, filled with oats instead of meat. He saw it in the absence of servants, and the almost desperate insistence on lavish gifts from foreign visitors.

“You’re broke,” Devin said. “Aren’t you?”

His father shuffled across the room to pour himself a drink from a crystal decanter. He shrugged dramatically. “Wars are expensive. Particularly when you support the losing side.”

“When you said I ruined the family ... ”

He scowled at Devin over the rim of his glass as he drank. “Did you think I was overstating things?” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Thanks to you, I can tell you exactly how much a spirit animal costs. Or how much ransom MacDonnell charges for the release of a prisoner, however disgraced and useless that prisoner may be.”

Zerif laced his fingers together. Devin found it deeply unsettling that the man was still sitting at the table, as calm as he’d ever seen him, utterly unbothered by Devin’s drawn weapon. “Fortunately for your father,” Zerif said, “I’ve been too busy to spend any of the coin he gave me for your little wildcat. And he has something of value left to sell.”

The truth dawned slowly on Devin, because it was nearly unthinkable—and because he didn’t want to believe it. But the guilt in his father’s red-rimmed eyes confirmed it.

“I won’t let you hurt Dawson,” Devin said, and he raised his broken sword higher. “Neither of you.”

“Not Dawson,” his father said, and he sagged as if suddenly burdened with some tremendous weight. He moved to stroke his spirit animal, but the lynx hissed softly at his approach. His father sighed, retracting his hand. “They won’t hurt Dawson. They just want the boar.”

“They?” Devin said. And his eyes went from his father, to Zerif ... to the third table setting, where the picked-clean bones of a small chicken

sat upon a fine porcelain plate.

“Raisha,” he whispered.

He turned and ran from the room, heedless of his father’s cry for him to stop. He didn’t even slow to sheathe his shattered sword but tore through the manor as fast as he could, cursing the size of the place as he crossed room after room, ascended two long flights of stairs, and navigated the top floor’s twisty halls to at last arrive at Dawson’s bedroom door. He rammed it open with his shoulder. The room was empty.

The slanting roof beyond the window was not.

“Well, look who figured it out,” Raisha said as Devin clambered through the open window.

“Devin,” Dawson said, almost sobbing in relief. He was backed up to the edge of the roof, and Raisha stood between him and the only accessible window. “She wants Rumfuss. She said if I don’t summon him—”

“Don’t,” Devin said, keeping his eyes on Raisha. “Don’t summon him. I’ll get you out of his.”

“Not with that sad excuse for a sword,” Raisha said, and she raised her own dagger, a wicked, gleaming thing.

“It’s not perfect,” Devin said. “And it’s lost a battle or two. But it’s still sharp.” He held it up. “What more do you need from a sword?”

He lunged, and Raisha knocked the blow aside.

She took a swing at him, but he leaned out of the path of her weapon.

They were well matched. For every strike, there was a parry. For every move, there was a counter. And all the while, they circled each other upon the roof, like dancers enraptured by a discordant song of clashing steel.

Devin had never won a fight. Not one-on-one like this.

But he didn’t have to beat her. He only had to clear enough space for Dawson to escape.

Devin rode a surge of confidence. The strangeness he had felt since Elda's tattoo disappeared into his skin was working for him now. Maintaining his balance felt effortless, even on the sloping rooftop. His reactions were quick, and his eyesight was sharp in the darkness. He could see the beads of sweat forming on Raisha's brow.

"Dawson," he said. "Get ready."

But then he heard his brother shout a warning. An eagle shrieked, and talons raked across Devin's back.

He didn't fall. And he didn't drop his sword. He gritted his teeth against the pain, and he stood his ground.

But then Raisha kicked him in the stomach, and he crumpled. His sword clattered away across the tiles.

"Devin!" Dawson cried.

Zerif slinked through the open window. Devin tried to shout threats at the man, to warn him away from Dawson, but he couldn't catch his breath to speak. And anyway, Zerif didn't move toward Dawson. He stepped up to Devin, bending over to grab him by the throat.

"I want to clarify something," Zerif said lightly, and he lifted Devin up. Devin could barely breathe, and he clutched at Zerif's wrist. It wasn't until he heard Dawson cry his name again that he realized Zerif had positioned him over the side of the roof. His feet kicked empty air.

"When you bonded with that sad little wildcat," Zerif continued, "I told you that you were a more worthy hero than the Four Fallen." He smiled. "I lied. It's probably obvious to you by now that you're *not* worthy, but I wanted you to know that I knew that." He raised his voice. "Dawson! Introduce me to Rumfuss, or we'll see if your brother's skull is as thick as they say."

Devin took a choked breath through Zerif's crushing grip. "Don't do it, Dawson," he rasped. "Remember ... remember that time I put tree sap in your hair?"

Zerif looked at him, amused.

“Remember,” Devin said, “when I put all your clothing on the dogs, and set them loose in the mud?” He gasped another breath. “I want you to run, Dawson. Run and don’t look back.”

“I remember,” Dawson said. “I remember every awful thing you ever did.” Tears streaked his face, but his voice was steady. “I also remember other things. Like when I broke Father’s favorite vase, and you took the blame because I was afraid. I love you, Devin.”

Rumfuss appeared in a flash of light and stood motionless upon the roof. The boar’s eyes found Devin’s, and there was such sadness there that Devin could hardly bear to look.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the boar.

With his free hand, Zerif hurled a small vial at Rumfuss. It broke on the Great Beast’s tough hide, seemingly without causing harm. But after a tense few seconds, Rumfuss disappeared again. Dawson gasped as if in pain at the same moment Zerif let out a triumphant chortle ... then released his grip on Devin.

He saw the look of surprise on Raisha’s face, and the utter despair on Dawson’s. And then he saw only the ground, three stories down and hurtling quickly upward to meet him.

If he’d had time to think about it, Devin would have been sure he was about to die.

But thinking had never been Devin’s strong suit.

He acted on pure instinct, tucking his body and rolling through the air until he was falling belly first. Then he held out all four limbs, bent them just enough to make them limber—and he landed in the grass on his hands and feet.

The pain was sudden and intense, but that’s how Devin knew he had survived.

And then he blacked out.



Devin awoke to the sight of two silhouetted figures looming above him. The light flickered dramatically, making it hard to focus, and for a moment he was afraid he'd damaged his vision.

But it was only fire. Fire was engulfing Trunswick Manor.

"Devin!" Dawson cried, and he embraced his brother. The talon marks on Devin's back flared in pain, but he didn't complain. He hugged his brother back.

"Man, that was impressive," Karmo said. "I saw you fall, and I thought, well ... But you're like a cat." There was awe in his voice, but his eyes were suspicious, like he was seeing Devin in a whole new light.

But Devin was more concerned with Dawson, who appeared shaky and pale. He knew what a terrible feeling it was to lose a spirit animal bond. "We can still stop them," he said. "We can get Rumfuss back."

Dawson shook his head sadly. "They're long gone. And I ... I can't feel Rumfuss anymore."

Devin winced. "I'm sorry, Dawson."

"Don't be sorry," Karmo said. "Be mad. Whatever Zerif is up to, he's just getting started. Come with me, and I can introduce you to some people who want him stopped." He looked over his shoulder. "Also, your house is on fire."

Devin could hear the shouts of the mob from around the front of the manor. They sounded like they were out for blood.

"I think Father is still inside," Dawson said. "Should we ... ?"

"Let Lord Trunswick look after himself," Devin said. "It's what he does best."



Miles from the town, they could still see the blaze.

"Man, Devin," Karmo said, "you sure know how to burn a bridge."

"There's no going back," Dawson said. "Is there?"

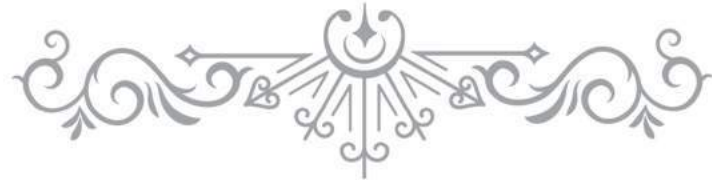
Devin took a long last look at the great plume of smoke drifting lazily into the sky above the ruins of his childhood home. “I guess I’m hoping that where we’re going is more important than where we came from.”

“We’ll get there,” Dawson said. He was still pale, but he managed a smile. “Together.”

“Together,” Devin agreed. “And something tells me that we’ll land on our feet.”



SUKA AND ARAX





A CHILL WIND

By Gavin Brown

FROM HER VANTAGE POINT HIGH ON A ROCKY CRAG, ANUQI watched the distant figure make its way across the glacier. The figure moved awkwardly, almost tripping with every step. It must be an outsider from the south, new to walking in snowshoes.

Strangers bring only broken promises and sorrow.

Those were the words her grandmother had always said whenever a visitor had come to Maliak. It was an old Ardu saying, passed down through the tribes of Arctica since the days when the first Euran traders had arrived. Bitter lessons of broken agreements and spoiled goods.

As a little girl, Anuqi hadn't believed her. She had loved the idea of mysterious strangers and longed to meet the Greencloaks who sometimes

traveled her land. But since her grandmother had died during the Second Devourer War, those words had proven true over and over.

Anuqi glanced over at the nook where her spirit animal had once rested. The massive polar bear would sun herself while Anuqi stood sentry and searched the horizon for strangers.

She looked away, trying not to dwell on the loss. Grandmother had always believed in her. If Grandmother had been alive, she wouldn't have stood by and let her parents sell Anuqi's only friend.

It wasn't *just* strangers who gave sorrow and broken promises.

Ever since the Greencloaks had arrived and destroyed Suka's Ice Palace, the village of Maliak had posted a sentry on the mountainside. Strangers were no longer welcome here.

Today it was Anuqi's turn to climb to the point where the ice turned to rock and see if anyone was approaching.

Anuqi grimaced. She didn't want to go down and tell the village that there was a traveler arriving. Her turn as sentry was one of the few times she could be alone, far away from the traitors who called themselves her family.

She wasn't sure they deserved it. But if she didn't warn them, they would accuse her of doing a sloppy job and make her spend the days sharpening bone knives with her father instead of alone up here. She hopped up and started down, carefully stepping her way down the icy slope.

There had been a time when she could have bounded down the slope, drawing the strength and sure-footedness of Suka, her spirit animal and one of the reborn Great Beasts. But her bond with Suka was gone, and with it her fearlessness. Anuqi had only seen eleven winters, but these days it felt more like eighty.

After she had gotten back and let the village elders know that a visitor was approaching, Anuqi walked to her parents' tent. She walked more quickly as soon as she heard the yelping of the dogs. Why were they

back? Her father should have been out with the fishing party, using his new sled to haul in their catch at the end of the day.

She'd barely had time to get inside, to take off her parka and breathe in the smothering smoky air, before her mother was in her face.

"What do you know about this? What haven't you told us?" her mother demanded. The short, stubby woman shoved a note in Anuqi's face.

Anuqi shrugged. She squinted at the piece of paper, but it was all squiggles to her. Some of the Arctican children in the larger settlements were learning to read, but Anuqi's family hadn't taken up the practice yet.

"I have no idea," she said, crossing her arms.

"If you've gone and brought more trouble on us ... " Her mother's voice trailed off, but the glare that followed said enough.

"Calm down, Saniaka," her father said, placing a hand on his wife's shoulder. "She can't read. She doesn't even know what it says."

"I can read it for you, if you like," another man's voice said.

Anuqi looked beyond her parents to see a thin stranger sitting at the table. He was skinny, almost gaunt, and had the pale look of one of the Euran traders. Broken promises and sorrow, sitting right here in their tent, her grandmother would say.

"I was paid to find you and deliver this message, and I suppose that includes reading it if needed," he added.

Her mother glared at the man, but neither of her parents moved to stop him. He sighed, stood up, and took the paper in his hands.

"To Anuqi, spirit bond of the Great Beast Suka," the messenger read. "We can help restore what has been taken from you. Meet me at the last day of the waning moon, at the Smiling Fox Inn, in Radenbridge. Sincerely, A friend."

Anuqi gaped at the man. "Is this a joke? Is someone mocking me?" she demanded.

Her spirit animal, the Great Beast Suka, had been taken two months ago. Two strangers, a man and a girl, had arrived late one evening. Anuqi had seen them from her sentry post. That time Suka had been with her, the polar bear alternating between sunning herself on the rocks and wrapping around Anuqi, protecting her from the Arctican chill.

With Suka around, Anuqi had never been cold, and never lonely. Now both gnawed at her every day.

“What business does this ‘friend’ have demanding that Anuqi go all the way to Eura?” her mother asked.

“We can’t afford the passage anyway,” her father added. “The whole idea is laughable.”

Anuqi eyed her parents. She didn’t believe the message one bit, but it was exactly like them to not even consider what she thought. Just like last time.

The strangers had come straight to her tent and made an offer. The man with his trim beard and predatory scowl, and the girl with her smug air of superiority. Anuqi had mistrusted them immediately.

The man had made the village an offer: Let him take Suka, in exchange for a hefty bag of coins. Her parents had refused, of course. Suka was an ancient friend of the Ardu, her father had said. No amount of gold could buy their sacred bear.

Anuqi’s mother had stalled the strangers while her father gathered a few friends from nearby. They arrived, armed with knives and clubs, and demanded that the strangers leave. Her father had looked like a hero, striding in with two other Ardu men to kick these frightening people out of their village.

Anuqi remembered pressing her head into Suka’s fur, not wanting to see what happened next. She could hear the bear’s angry growl as her spirit animal stared down the visitors. She expected to hear fighting, but instead there were bright flashes of light, and she was forced to look up.

The inside of the tent was suddenly a tumult. A massive boar appeared from thin air, followed by a ram and an eagle. Immediately the

animals attacked the three men. Her father and his friends retreated, barely dodging tusks, horns, and talons.

Suka gave a great roar and charged at the bearded stranger, but the haughty girl jumped in from the side. Anuqi saw her slap something concealed within her hand—it looked like a small black vial—against the polar bear’s head.

Suka suddenly stopped. The polar bear shook her head side to side in confusion, pawing at her own face. Then her eyes went wide and she lay down.

Anuqi remembered screaming. It had felt like her world was being torn apart, like every piece of her was twisting in a different direction. And then Suka had stood up, with a dead look in her eyes, and there was only icy emptiness inside Anuqi.

She had collapsed, shaking in pain and terror as her connection with Suka was shredded. The polar bear calmly padded over to stand next to the man and the girl. Anuqi’s spirit animal and best friend in the world had left without even looking back.

“It seems the ‘ancient friend of the Ardu’ has made her own choice,” the bearded man had said with a small smile. “Once again, she chooses freedom.”

The last thing Anuqi had seen before blacking out from the pain was her mother accepting the bag of coins that the sneering girl offered her.

Her parents had tried to explain that they needed the money. That after the war and the poor hunting season, they barely had enough to feed themselves—let alone the sled dogs. Suka was gone anyway, her mother had said. But Anuqi hadn’t spoken to her for weeks.

The pain had lessened as time passed, but it would never go away. It was as if she had been warming herself by a fire, only to have a snowdrift collapse onto it.

Anuqi put away thoughts of the past and glared at her parents. No, they didn’t care what she felt or wanted. Not a bit.

“Your friend also sent this,” the messenger said, handing Anuqi a small jingling pouch. It was heavy with coins. “Enough coppers to pay for the journey.”

Anuqi grimaced. Another stranger with a bag of money—another disaster waiting to happen. Her parents just stared, her father in surprise and her mother in greed. Anuqi’s grandmother hadn’t cared for money, but since the Euran traders had started coming every year, all her mother could think of was how to earn enough to buy fancy goods and foreign spices.

“What is this?” her father demanded. “What are you playing at?”

“I’m sorry I can’t offer more of an explanation. That’s all I was told to do,” the man said. “My duty is discharged. Now I have other deliveries to make. Farewell. And good luck, Anuqi.”

Her mother hustled the man out the door. The moment the tent flap was shut, she snatched the bag from Anuqi’s hands.

“Well, you’re obviously not going to Eura,” her mother said with a laugh. “But this money won’t hurt. We can finally replace that leaky old kayak.”

Anuqi’s father put a hand on her shoulder. She wanted to shrug it off, but didn’t resist.

“I’m sorry, Anuqi,” he said. “You must know there’s no way this could lead to Suka. You’re going to have to accept that she’s gone.”

At that, Anuqi pulled away. “Suka is out there,” she snapped. “We lost her once to the Greencloaks, and you just let her go then. Now we have a second chance to make things right, and you want to give up on her?”

Her mother’s shoulders slumped, and her father just sighed. Anuqi knew she couldn’t expect them to understand.

“Suka left of her own accord,” her mother said softly as she tucked the pouch of coins under a wolfskin blanket. “We guarded her for years, and she walked away—twice. But now that’s all over. There’s nothing we can do.”

“I told you that girl did something to her!” Anuqi protested. “I saw it!”

“We’re all devastated that Suka is gone,” her father added. “But can’t you see what this is, Anuqi? Someone is trying to take advantage of you.”

“I’m going to go check the snares,” Anuqi said, grabbing her parka and roughly pushing the tent flaps back. She stepped out and shrugged the parka over her shoulders. She’d already visited the snares—she didn’t really need to check them until the morning—but Anuqi wanted space to breathe.

As she trudged through the snow, an icy wind blew across the tundra. She really should have brought snowshoes, but there was no way she was going back now. Anuqi leaned into the wind’s biting caress. Suka’s power was in that Arctican chill, and when she let it envelop her, Anuqi could sense that, somewhere, Suka was still out there. For a moment she stopped and hugged herself, as her body reached out for a connection that she knew was dead. A wave of answering pain blossomed in her chest.

The message probably *was* a lie, but her parents were still wrong. One way or another, Anuqi would find her spirit animal again.

As she walked, she felt the wind tugging at her. It gusted, twisting through the hills like a roar. Almost like the roar of a polar bear.

Anuqi glanced up at the sky, where the aurora was beginning to appear—green brushes of light against the starry sky. The legends of the Ardu held that the aurora’s lights were the spirits of her ancestors, playing in the sky forever. Perhaps her grandmother was up there, looking down on her plight. And, knowing Grandmother, probably also muttering curses at outsiders and demanding that Anuqi peel her some fireweed to soothe her gums. But still, she would be watching.

The wind roared. Anuqi knew what she had to do.



When she returned to the family tent, her parents had already gone to sleep. Anuqi had suffered through their snoring, his low-pitched and hers high, for all her life. Now, whatever else happened, at least she would have a break from that.

Creeping with a stealth honed by prowling through the tundra and avoiding predators, Anuqi gathered up traveling clothes, snowshoes, food, and her trusty snow knife. She would never truly feel safe again until she had Suka back, but the knife strapped against her thigh made her feel slightly better.

It was the work of a moment to pull back the wolfskin that her mother hid all her valuables behind. Finally, Anuqi piled up old skins so that it would look like she was in her bed if anyone checked.

The low-pitched snoring stopped for a moment. Anuqi froze, her heart pounding like seal-leather drums in her ears. If her parents woke up and discovered her, they would never let her out of their sight again.

But then her father sneezed, and his snoring resumed. Anuqi slipped out of her parents' tent like a soft night breeze and started away.

At the edge of the village, she strapped on her snowshoes. With the night's head start, she would be too far gone for anyone to catch her. And with the wind gusting steadily and a light snow falling, tracking her would be difficult to impossible.

As she started out across the snow, Anuqi looked up. The aurora was in full force now, greens and blues spilling across the sky. This outsider might be another liar, but she was determined. The dull ache where Suka had been was still there, but somehow slightly less as she tracked across the tundra. One way or another, she was going to find her spirit animal. Anuqi would not return to the lands of the Ardu until they were reunited.



Anuqi left her snowshoes behind when she reached the Arctican channel, and packed her thick parka away when the ferryman's boat touched

down on Eura's northern shores. The trek was long, and more than a few copper coins had been lost to innkeepers' hands just to get directions. By the time she reached Radenbridge, Anuqi's bag was empty.

Radenbridge was not a large town by Euran standards, but it was easily several times the size of any of the settlements in Ardu lands. Even in her lightest hide clothes, Anuqi was too warm, and she felt out of place amid the crowds of pale foreigners.

Except I'm the foreigner here, she realized with a grimace. Not them.

The Smiling Fox Inn was not hard to find, right on the main thoroughfare. She dodged wagons and a stray dog as she crossed the street to the largest building in town. It was marked with a red fox that was grinning as if it had just raided all the chicken coops Anuqi had seen on farms along the road.

She glanced up as she approached the inn. The sun was still out, but she had been watching the skies. It was the last day of the waning moon. Ignoring the stares of the passing Eurans, she pushed open the door and walked in.

The inn's common room was the largest building she had ever been inside, two stories tall with tables and benches strewn across the stone floor. She stood frozen for a moment as the patrons bustled around her, calling for food and drink.

A small man appeared at her shoulder, wearing a stained apron and a perpetually annoyed expression.

"Come, come, you're drawing attention," he said, taking her by the elbow and guiding her to a dark table in the corner. "Just sit here. I'll bring you some soup."

"I don't have any money left, so—" she started, but the man hushed her.

"Just sit here," he repeated firmly. "I'll bring you everything you need."

She nodded, grateful to finally be off her feet after the long journey. And with no coin left, she hadn't had any real food in a day. She was

famished.

The man brought her a bowl of steaming-hot stew, which Anuqi attacked with vigor. When she picked up the bowl to drain the last dregs of broth, she noticed a small piece of paper folded underneath the bowl. As stealthily as she could, Anuqi grabbed the paper and held it below the table, straining to read it in the flickering firelight.

She stared at the markings on the sheet. They looked scratched, like they had been scrawled by one of the chickens in a panic before the smiling fox arrived. Of course, it wouldn't have mattered if the note had been gorgeously penned by the head scribe to the Queen of Eura; she still wouldn't be able to read it.

She stared at the page. Why had she come so far, for a "friend" who didn't even know that most Arcticans couldn't read? And now she was stuck. She didn't have enough coin to afford the passage back home, even if she could make it that far.

When the innkeeper returned again, she was still looking at the piece of paper in her lap.

"What are you doing?" he hissed. "You're starting to draw attention to yourself, as if you hadn't already."

She glared at him. "I can't read this," she hissed back, feeling the color rise in her face at having to admit that.

He rolled his eyes but leaned in close and whispered in her ear. "It says to go to the top floor, to the last door on the right, and knock four times," he said. "Now, get out of here and forget you ever spoke to me."

Anuqi nodded sullenly.

"That skinny shrew didn't pay me nearly enough for this," he muttered as he walked away.

Anuqi waited for a minute, pretending to pack up her few possessions. Then she made her way up the stairs. She tried to put on her best casual walk, but wondered as she mounted the stairs if that was just making it worse. There had never been a call for trickery and lies among

the Ardu, other than coming up with the occasional excuse for why she was out with Suka too long.

Suka ... Anuqi tried to put her friend out of her thoughts as she reached the top floor. Was there some chance she would find out where her spirit animal was? Would this “friend” be able to help get Suka back? Probably not. But she’d come this far. Anuqi knocked four times.

The door swung open a crack. A beady eye and the point of a crossbow peered out. Anuqi stepped back and gasped, but the door opened fully and the crossbow was lowered. The eye belonged to a tall young woman with thin cheekbones. The girl glanced up and down the hallway with sharp movements, and then motioned Anuqi inside.

Anuqi stepped in. The room was bare and basic, much like the ones she’d stayed in on her journey through Eura to get here. There was a chest, a rug, and a modest straw bed. Sitting on the corner of the bed was a tiny boy.

The young woman closed the door and cleared her throat. “Thank you for coming. We weren’t sure if you would believe the note.”

Anuqi said nothing. Had she believed it? She had almost wanted to, but it just seemed too far-fetched.

“I’m Talon, and this is Grif,” the girl said.

Anuqi eyed the two of them. The young woman looked frail, and the boy was tiny. She groaned. She knew the note had been too good to be true. “You two? You’re going to help get my spirit animal back? What, you and the eight-year-old over there?”

“Hey, I may look eight, but I’m actually eleven, and I punch like I’m fifteen.” He held up a tiny fist, making his best menacing face.

The girl who called herself Talon started laughing, high-pitched and flighty, and Anuqi couldn’t help but chuckle herself. The boy scowled at first, then grinned. He hopped down from the bed and performed a mock bow.

“Grif Burnam, at your service,” he said, straightening up to his unimpressive full height. He was wearing a gray cape and had two tiny

daggers sheathed at his belt.

“You ... you look like the world’s smallest adventurer,” Anuqi couldn’t help but say. She had to admit, he was almost cute, with his tiny battle gear and determined face.

“And what if I am?” The boy raised his chin, gaining perhaps a quarter inch in height. “I go places others can’t go. I see things others can’t see. I’m the one,” he said, practically glowing with pride, “who found out who would be in Radenbridge this week. And with stolen spirit animals in tow.”

Anuqi glared at the tiny boy. “Do you mean that Suka is here? In Radenbridge?”

“No,” Talon interrupted softly. “I’m sorry, Anuqi, she’s not here. But the girl who helped Zerif steal her from you is. And she has other spirit animals, stolen from others like you.”

“So you brought me all this way, but you don’t know where Suka is? You want me for something completely different?”

Talon sighed. “Zerif’s power is growing. We have to fight him any way we can. If we keep harrying him, we hope to discover more of his plans and methods. When we learn enough, hopefully we’ll be able to find your spirit animals and rescue them. Until then, we’ll strip him of his allies. But we need your assistance.”

“Help us, and my daggers will be sworn to your service,” Grif said, puffing his little chest out. “I will help rescue your spirit animal, or die trying.”

Anuqi stifled a laugh.

“He’s serious,” Talon said, nervously checking the window and listening at the door for a moment. The girl seemed to be always in motion.

“Why do you even care?” Anuqi asked, raising an eyebrow at Grif. “What’s in this for you?”

Grif’s confidence suddenly sagged, just for a moment. Then he straightened up.

“There were strangers in town the day I summoned my spirit animal,” he said. “There are no Nectar Ceremonies anymore, so it just happened out of the blue—the sky darkened and there was this flash of light. Zerif struck before anyone realized what was happening. Our Greencloak was an old man; he went down immediately. My father was slashed across the chest, and the other adults ran away. I hid and watched. Zerif took him. Zerif used that weird worm and took my spirit animal. I never even got to touch him.”

“I’m sorry,” Anuqi said automatically. Something about the way he said it, so calm and tight, made her believe him even more than if he’d started bawling. “I ... I know what that’s like.”

“Grif summoned Arax the Ram,” Talon said with a sad smile. “Another reincarnated Great Beast. Zerif and Raisha stole him away, just as they did Suka, and two others before them. Now do you see why we have to fight? They will continue taking spirit animals, unless they’re stopped.”

Anuqi shook her head. It was all too much. Grif, with his tiny daggers, was about as threatening as a baby seal. And Talon looked as if a stiff breeze would blow her out to sea. If Anuqi joined forces with them, she was likely to get hurt or killed. And then what would happen to Suka?

Even so ... Anuqi noted that Grif did seem to wear his weapons with a certain confidence. And Talon’s crossbow was still loaded and cocked, even if it was pointing down at the floor. Anuqi had never been a fighter. Ardu children were trained to trap, track, and survive in the cold, but the closest she’d come to fighting was tussling with the other kids in her settlement.

More than ever, Anuqi wished for Suka. Her warmth, her strength ... and her massive claws. With her polar bear at her side, Anuqi had always felt safe. Like nothing could harm her.

She looked pointedly at the crossbow. “Do I have a choice? Or will you just make me do what you want, like everyone else?”

“You’re completely free to go,” Talon said, sighing as she unloaded the crossbow and set it on the bed. “I’ll never force someone to serve against their will. Those days are in my past.”

Was this girl serious? Anuqi could think of only one way to find out.

Anuqi nodded, then stood up and walked out the door without another word. She went down the stairs and waited, perfectly still, listening for the sounds of movement from above. There was nothing.

She weighed her options. She could try to make her way home. With no money left and her parents likely furious with her, that was a bitter prospect. Or she could place her trust in these two oddball characters and their mission.

Anuqi breathed in deep. She’d come this far. She would have to try, at least.

A moment later she was back up the stairs, knocking on the door.

Talon opened it, staring at Anuqi in surprise.

Behind her, the boy was laughing. “Told you she’d come back,” Grif said.

Anuqi gave him a dark look. “I just needed to know if you would actually let me go. If you were telling the truth.”

“Then, by all means. Come in,” Talon said, glancing nervously back and forth down the hallway as Anuqi entered.

“How can we hit back at them?” Anuqi asked.

“Raisha is camped outside of town,” Talon explained. “She has a whole troop of mercenaries with her. Radenbridge’s Greencloak is about to hold a ceremony inviting any children who summoned animals to take the green. There are three this year, with three bright, shiny new spirit animals.”

“We think Raisha is going to hide in the crowd,” Grif added. “Pretend to be part of a merchant’s caravan. As soon as the children are all called up, her men will strike.”

“And we do what?” Anuqi asked, incredulous. “Take on a whole troop of mercenaries by ourselves? Shouldn’t those cursed Greencloaks

be taking care of this?”

“The Greencloaks are too far away,” Talon explained. “The Keeper and a whole party of them are headed toward Brecksbury, a day’s journey from here. But they won’t arrive until tomorrow. Plus ...” Talon faltered, suddenly awkward.

“Talon’s got some kind of history with them,” Grif said. “I’m guessing she was a criminal, but she doesn’t talk about it.” He raised his hands in the air, as if talking about an errant puppy.

Anuqi glanced at the wiry girl. That would explain her nervousness. Anuqi wasn’t sure she wanted to work with a former criminal, but she didn’t say anything. Instead, she just shrugged. “Hey, I’m no friend of the Greencloaks,” she said. “When they need you they’re all high-minded and virtuous. And then they leave behind a trail of destruction. Just strangers bringing sorrow. And when I could have actually used their help, they were nowhere to be seen.”

Talon gave a tight smile and bobbed her head quickly, like a bird. “I know about what happened to the Ardu. My plan should help prevent the same disaster from happening to Radenbridge.”

Grif lay a hand on his dagger, which to Anuqi was one half menacing and one half adorable. “Raisha won’t know what hit her.”

“All right,” Anuqi said with a sigh. “I’m in. How are we possibly going to pull this off?”

“Have a seat, and we’ll explain everything. We don’t have much time to make our preparations.”

Anuqi sat cross-legged on the floor, and the three set to work.



The Radenbridge town square was alive with activity. A crowd had gathered, filling it to the brim and overflowing into the streets. Vendors hawked their wares, and a large stage had been set up at the center.

Radenbridge was a market town, and in addition to the presentation, this was a market day. Livestock of all kinds milled about. There were cows, sheep, goats, horses, and other animals tethered all around the square. Cages filled with chickens, geese, and pigeons were lined up near the stage. Animal calls and the clacking of hooves on cobbles filled the air with a strange sort of song.

Talon had given Anuqi new clothes to wear: a woolen cloak and a slouching hat that obscured her features. With her head downcast, she looked like just another farmer or shepherd in from the hills surrounding Radenbridge.

Anuqi let herself be pushed back and forth by the crowd, slowly working her way through the swell to the back of the stage. It wasn't much different from working the waves in a kayak, even if the number of people around her made the hairs on her neck stand on end.

She cast her eyes over the crowd, trying to note who looked suspicious. There were no mysterious cloaked figures, but there were certainly plenty of tough-looking men who could easily be mercenaries.

Then, at the edge of the square, Anuqi saw her: Raisha. The girl seemed to be enjoying bossing around a pair of burly mercenaries. She had a slight sneer on her face, the same expression she'd worn as she ripped Suka out of Anuqi's life. A vicious-looking dagger was sheathed at her waist.

The Arctican girl turned away, smiling tightly to herself. If nothing else, Talon and Grif had given her the chance to fight back. Even if their plan seemed unlikely to succeed.

Anuqi kept her head down as Radenbridge's mayor gave a brief speech and the town's Greencloak stepped forward. She didn't dare look back at Raisha. If she was recognized, the whole plan could be ruined.

Radenbridge's Greencloak was a middle-aged man. He might have once been a competent warrior, but now he sported a paunch and moved with ungainly steps. He wouldn't be much help. Anuqi shook her head.

The Greencloaks sounded good in the stories, but the reality of them never quite matched up.

“We no longer have the Nectar of Ninani,” the mayor said. “But some among you have summoned spirit animals all the same. Come forward!”

A boy was the first to come, with a large yak trotting next to him. It turned when they arrived at the front, eyeing the crowd suspiciously. Then it gave a grunt and leaned down to explore a patch of grass sprouting from between the cobblestones.

Anuqi’s body tensed. A tall girl came forward, with a tree frog sitting on her shoulder. A horsefly flitted past and the frog’s tongue whipped out and plucked a snack from the air.

Finally a third child, a slight girl with black pigtails, came forward. Her parents had to push her out of the crowd. She vaulted the steps quickly, then took up a position almost behind the taller girl. A Great Dane padded along next to her, looking almost as spooked by the crowd.

Anuqi pushed her way through the press of bodies. The Greencloak stepped forward.

“You have summoned animals and are counted among the Marked. Will you accept the call of the Greencloaks, and serve—”

The chaos erupted before he could finish.

As she charged forward, Anuqi could see and hear it around her: swords screeching out of their scabbards and panicked screaming from all directions. Anuqi caught a glimpse of Raisha in the crowd, her face the very picture of shocked innocence. Anuqi felt a fresh spike of hatred for the unctuous girl.

As the mercenaries advanced from the crowd and the Radenbridge locals fled, Talon emerged from under the stage, grabbing the first boy and girl and their spirit animals and pulling them with her.

The local constable and the Greencloak had drawn their weapons. Anuqi darted past them. The square suddenly exploded as Grif flashed onto the scene, moving faster than Anuqi could have imagined. Grif slashed the leads of the horses and the knots holding the birdcages

closed. Everywhere he went, clouds of feathers and beating hooves followed.

“For Arax!” he yelled as he sliced a knot and a stallion charged past.

The panicked animals stampeded through the square, turning confusion into complete pandemonium. Anuqi dodged a crazed mule and reached the girl with the pigtails, the final one to summon an animal.

Anuqi looked down at the girl in front of her. Her eyes were wide, her arms wrapped around the Great Dane’s neck.

“Come with me. We have to get you out of here,” Anuqi said.

“But who are you?”

“I’m ... a friend.” Anuqi realized with a jolt that this was the same thing that Talon had said to *her*. The word that she’d had such a hard time accepting. “I can help you. I can get you out of here before those men take you. If you will trust me.”

Please, Anuqi thought. Let this girl be more ready to trust than I was.

For a long moment, the girl shrank back. Anuqi reached out her hand, trying to put the concern she felt into her eyes. Then, reluctantly, the girl took Anuqi’s hand. They ran together, dodging chickens, geese, and an irate goat.

Anuqi glanced back as she ran. The last thing she saw before rounding a corner was the town’s Greencloak holding off two of Raisha’s mercenaries by himself with deft swings from a long sword. Perhaps there was more to him than she’d initially thought.

As her feet pounded on the cobblestones and she pulled the girl along beside her, Anuqi hoped he would make it out alive. The Greencloak was buying them precious seconds.

Around the corner, they caught up to Talon and the two other children. The girl with the tree frog held her spirit animal close, while Talon and the boy were trying to get the yak moving forward. It was slow to start, but with the boy urging it on, it was trotting along by the time Anuqi caught up.

“Let’s go!” Anuqi shouted. The odd mix of humans and animals accelerated down the cobbled street.

At the next turn, Grif emerged from an alley grinning like a madman, his face covered in mud.

“Their horses?” Talon asked.

“Cut loose, spooked, and headed for the hills,” he answered, sliding easily into their pace.

They reached the town gate, where the guards were struggling to lower the portcullis without much success.

“There’s a rock in the gears!” Talon shouted brightly as they charged through. The guards watched in shock as the crowd of people and animals passed them by. Anuqi looked back as they sprinted across the field outside the walls, and saw the gate lowering to the ground.

“Told you it would work,” Grif crowed as they reached the trees. There was a sudden crash. “I also loosened the screws on the winch,” he added. “Once it starts down, there’s no stopping it.”

There was shouting at the gate as the mercenaries reached it, only to find it closed. That would buy Anuqi and the others time to make their escape. Anuqi had to admit, she was shocked that their plan had succeeded so far. Maybe Talon and Grif really were capable of pulling this off. Though she still wasn’t sure what they were up to.

Anuqi took the lead as they reached the edge of the woods. There was a light dusting of snow on the ground that had fallen overnight.

She led them off the road immediately, heading up a tiny deer trail for a few minutes and then into the deep brush. At least here, horses wouldn’t be able to follow.

While Talon and Grif had prepared their tricks in the city, Anuqi had been plotting out their escape path. She might not be much of a fighter, but when it came to tracking and making their way through the snowy landscape, she would wager she knew more than any of these city dwellers.

It was winter and the ground was frozen, but even so she knew they were leaving tracks in the snow that Raisha and her goons would be able to follow.

“What’s your name?” Anuqi asked the pigtailed girl.

“I’m Maena,” the girl answered. “My family runs the town’s mill. Will ... will I be able to go back to them?”

“You’ll need to stay hidden,” Talon said. “But once Raisha and these mercenaries have passed, they won’t come back. Raisha is a prominent merchant’s daughter. She has too much to lose for a few animals.”

Anuqi knew what that meant. For normal spirit animals.

For the reborn Great Beasts, like those she and Grif had summoned, Raisha and Zerif would likely never stop hunting—not until they had them all.

Anuqi led them through the woods and a quarter mile down a shallow winter stream before they crossed to the other side.

“My feet are freezing,” Maena complained.

“Moving water makes it hard for the trackers to follow us,” Anuqi told her. “They’ll have to track up and down both sides of the stream looking for signs. This should gain us enough time.”

“Raisha is a pampered brat,” Talon added. “And she’s from southern Zhong, so I doubt she’s very familiar with snowy terrain like this. But her mercenaries are experienced hunters. They’ll know how to track us.”

Anuqi stopped them when they reached a rocky slope, which was mostly free of snow. There would be no tracks left here. She beckoned the three village children and their animals to a large boulder with a hollow behind it.

“This is a good spot to lay low,” Anuqi said, pulling aside a thicket of branches that had been covered by snow. Yesterday, Anuqi had carefully prepared it after discussing the plans with Talon and Grif. Once the branches, snow, and leaves were replaced, anyone inside would be almost invisible.

“Hide in here,” Anuqi ordered. “Once they pass you, wait an hour then head back downstream.”

“We’ll take care of Raisha’s people,” Talon said. “But for now you need to stay out of sight.”

The three looked back at Talon, wide-eyed.

“You can do this,” Talon assured them.

Maena nodded, then stepped forward and wrapped Anuqi in a hug. “Thank you,” the girl said. Her Great Dane barked at them. It wasn’t quite the warm furry embrace of Suka, but Anuqi squeezed her back.

“You’ll be okay,” she whispered. “Don’t worry.”

Once the three were huddled in the hollow behind the boulder, Anuqi covered the opening and used the branch of a fir tree to brush the snow smooth around them.

Grif picked up a pile of sticks that were lying by the rocks. He handed a pair to Talon and a pair to Anuqi. Anuqi took a look at the bottoms of hers. They were carved into the rough shape of yak hooves.

“We’ll need to walk slowly and leave extra prints for a bit,” Anuqi instructed Grif and Talon as they set out. “If they stay focused on our trail, they won’t realize half of their prey have escaped.”

“We’ll see who the predators are ... and who are the prey,” Grif said darkly. His right hand squeezed his dagger.

As they walked, they pressed the sticks that Grif had carved yesterday into the snow along their path. Hopefully Raisha would see only that they had stopped briefly, and the humans and animals had all continued up the ravine.

“I knew your skills would be useful, Anuqi,” Talon said with a grim smile as they ascended to the top of the ravine, stepping heavily. “You may not be a fighter, but you’ve a cunning to you.”

Anuqi said nothing, but the thought warmed her. She would need all of that cunning in order to eventually rescue Suka.

They kept moving through the evening and into the night. Anuqi used every trick the Ardu hunters taught her—backtracking, circling around,

and hopping on rocks—to try to obscure their trail. But they would always leave a few “mistaken” broken branches or tracks.

“Let’s not be too good at this,” Talon said with a chuckle as she intentionally put a few extra footprints along the way. “We’re trying to slow them down, not lose them entirely.”

The moon rose as they crossed open farmland. They first saw their pursuers at the edge of a sheep pasture. The figures were distant, barely specks on the horizon. But as the night wore on, the moon made its way across the sky and the shadows shifted on the snow—and the mercenaries kept gaining.

“I’m sorry,” Grif said, starting to puff as they moved along. The boy finally seemed to be losing stamina. Running around like he had in the city, Anuqi was only surprised he’d lasted this long. “I won’t be the cause of your deaths—let me stay behind. I can slow them down so that you can make it close enough to use the horn.”

Anuqi glared at him. “You’re not getting off that easy. Stuff your honor.”

“Keep moving,” Talon shot. “We’re close now.” She touched the horn around her neck. “Another mile and the Greencloaks will come running.”

Anuqi looked behind them. She could make out the individual figures now, their weapons gleaming in the moonlight. She kept her legs moving underneath her, trying to ignore the chill seeping in through her soaked feet and wind-tossed face.

With every step the mercenaries grew closer. Part of Anuqi wanted them to catch up. Let them take their best shot. She had her snow knife buckled at her hip. If she went down fighting, at least she wouldn’t have to worry about the emptiness inside her where Suka had been. She could make Raisha pay for what she’d done.

Grif fell behind. Anuqi was about to urge him on when she saw the furious expression on his face as sweat dripped from his hair, even in the cold air. He was already giving it everything.

Finally, breathing heavily, Talon skidded to a stop at the bottom of a ridge amid a stand of trees. She pulled the horn over her neck and held it for a long moment.

“We’re here.... I just need a moment ... to catch my breath,” she said.

Anuqi took a long look back across the field, where the enemy was approaching. They had gotten so close! If Talon was right, a large force of Greencloaks were camped just over the rise.

Now that they were closing in, Anuqi noticed something alarming about the mercenaries: Raisha wasn’t among them.

Her whole body tensed as she searched. There, over to the right, just a stone’s throw from their tracks, was another set in parallel. Anuqi spun around just in time to see a figure stepping out of the trees.

Before she could open her mouth, Raisha was behind Talon. A sharp dirk gleaming at Talon’s throat.

“Drop the horn,” Raisha commanded. Talon let it fall to the ground.

“Grif, Anuqi,” Talon said. “Run. It doesn’t matter if I die.”

“Move an inch and I slit her throat,” Raisha said, a cruel grin spreading across her face.

Grif’s daggers were out, but he stood unmoving. “If you hurt her,” he said, glaring at Raisha, “you *will* feel my daggers.”

Anuqi stood frozen for a moment. Was she really going to let herself be captured for someone she’d only just met? Talon had told her to run.

Anuqi finally spun and started up the hill, but it was too late. The mercenaries had crossed the pasture and were already in the trees, weapons drawn. Anuqi only made it a few steps before one of them crashed into her, sending her staggering. Her foot caught under a root and Anuqi went down, yelping with pain.

She tried to fight back as the mercenaries tied her hands, but her ankle throbbed with every movement. Finally she gave in and let them tie her.

“I’d make you tell me where those spirit animals are, but we don’t have time for another wild chase,” Raisha said. “Still, I’m sure that Zerif

will enjoy questioning you when we meet with him. You have other friends out there, don't you?" she asked Talon.

Talon's sharp features were set. Anuqi had never seen the girl so still.

One of the larger mercenaries hefted Anuqi onto his shoulder as if she weighed nothing. She passed out as her ankle was wrenched once again.



The wagon smelled like a barn. It was full of cages, and each contained an animal. There were birds, ferrets, dogs, and even a porcupine. With every bump they hit, the entire array would explode with noise.

Talon, Grif, and Anuqi were in cages as well. These weren't like the cages in the market, wooden affairs tied shut with rope—they were steel and secured with real locks. The mercenaries had forced them to march through the rest of the night and all the next day, before reaching their wagons and imprisoning them in one full of stolen spirit animals. Grif and Talon had taken turns supporting Anuqi and her broken ankle, which had given her a stab of pain with every step.

"I'm sorry," Anuqi said, eyeing the cut on Talon's neck where Raisha's dirk had rested. "I shouldn't have run."

Talon shrugged. "I told you to."

"I guess I paid for it," Anuqi said. The massive swelling of her sprained ankle had gotten worse.

"Enough of that!" Grif hissed. "Let's figure out how to get out of here."

They each tested the locks and bars of their cages. Anuqi pushed, rattled, and prodded, but there was no give to their prisons. Talon appeared to be making friends with a robin in a nearby cage, but it was just as stuck as they were.

Talon pointed at a pile of weapons and gear in the corner near Anuqi. "Can you reach any of that?"

Anuqi stretched her hand out through the bars of her cage but couldn't get to them.

"What about that pouch at the end?" Grif said. "Maybe it has something small that we could pick the locks with? A sword won't be much use, inside a metal cage."

Anuqi strained, but it was a few handbreadths too far. "Sorry, my arms just aren't long enough," she said.

"Hold on," Talon said. She reached through the metal bars of her enclosure to the robin's small wooden cage and snapped a few of the spokes. The bird hopped free.

"These are spirit animals," Talon explained. "Smarter than most animals."

Through a combination of pointing, nodding, and whispered instructions, Talon was able to convince the robin to flutter over and drag the pouch the few feet required so that Anuqi could reach out and grab it.

The pouch contained flint, a ring of steel, and a gray powder that Anuqi didn't recognize.

"Hold it up to the light," Talon instructed, peering through the bars. "It looks like Zhongese blast powder!" she said at last. "If you light it off by your lock, it should blast it off. Then you can make a run for safety."

It was worth a shot. Anuqi shifted her weight to get started and her ankle twisted again. Pain blazed up and down her leg. She looked down despondently. She could blow the lock and run, but how far would she get trying to sneak away on a sprained ankle?

"Let *me* go," Grif said quietly. "I'll come back for both of you. I swear it on my honor. And on Arax and Suka." He scuttled forward in his cage, looking at her with big, serious eyes. "Trust me. I won't fail you."

Anuqi sat still, considering. She'd tried to escape alone once already, and look where it had gotten her.

She looked from Talon to Grif, sizing up the willowy young woman and the tiny warrior. Her companions weren't much to look at, but

together the three of them had already saved several spirit animals. Three kids wouldn't have to feel the cold emptiness that had been sucking at Anuqi every moment since Suka had gone. Perhaps the time had come to put some faith in her new friends.

She untied the powder and tossed it over to Grif. It was the work of a moment for him to put the blast powder inside his lock. Talon tossed him an old letter that she had hidden in her shirt, which Grif lit after several attempts.

He waited until the wagon hit another large bump, then lit the blast powder as the wagon shook and the animals went wild. The tiny explosion was muffled by the cacophony.

Grif coughed, waving smoke away. What was left of his lock hung flimsily on the cage door. Grif prodded it with the steel striker, and the charred lump of metal fell to the wagon floor.

He was out of his cage in an instant. Grif grabbed an ax from the pile of supplies. A few blows to the floorboards, timed with the wagon's bumps, revealed the dark ground passing by below.

"Wait until you see a mud puddle," Anuqi suggested. "Your clothes are brown and dirty, so you should blend in. If polar bears use snow cover to hunt, you should be able to use mud cover to stay hidden."

"Take that robin with you," Talon suggested. "The Greencloaks should be able to recognize a stolen spirit animal. Our only chance now is to find them."

Grif carefully grabbed the tiny bird and waited until a large mud puddle passed by, then dropped through the hole into the brown muck. Anuqi and Talon listened closely for several minutes, but there were no shouts of alarm or sounds of combat. Had he escaped?

Anuqi's stomach twisted on itself as the night passed slowly. She hoped she'd done the right thing in letting Grif go.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself dropping through that hole, leaving all this behind.



Through the cracks in the wagon, they could just see dawn breaking. The sound of a horn echoed in the morning air. Anuqi was tired and groggy, and only slowly recognized the noise for what it was—a war horn.

“The Greencloaks are here,” Talon said softly. Anuqi would have expected her to sound more pleased that they were being rescued.

Shortly after, the shouts of men and women and the crashing of steel on steel rang out, accompanied by animal calls of all kinds. Two errant arrows slammed into the walls of their wagon.

Talon and Anuqi waited silently, not knowing what to hope for.

“If it’s the Greencloaks who find us,” Talon said, “tell them you never met me. Tell them you were captured separately. It will go easier for you that way.”

Anuqi wanted to ask why, but the set of Talon’s lips made it clear that she had said all she would say. Anuqi gripped the bars of her cage as the battle continued outside.

Suddenly, a tiny head popped up through the hole in the floor of the wagon. A small, muddy figure wriggled his way up inside.

“Told you I’d be back,” Grif said with a grin. “And look what I grabbed off one of the mercenaries!” He brandished a ring of keys and set to work trying them on Anuqi’s cage. A moment later, all three of them were free.

“Let’s get out now, while they’re still fighting,” Talon suggested.

“We should be able to make it to the trees at the side of the road if we’re quick,” Grif said. “They’re fairly distracted, what with the battle and all.”

The three slipped down through the hold, shimmied across the ground, and dashed for the woods. Anuqi gritted her teeth as the pain in her ankle flared, but kept running.

As they passed into the darkness of the woods, Anuqi looked back to the train of wagons. Greencloaks and mercenaries were in pitched battle.

“That’s the Keeper,” Talon said, pointing to a young figure resplendent in tellunum armor, battling two mercenaries. A moment later, the mercenaries gave up and fled for the trees on the other side of the road.

“And over there—that one is Keith.” A Greencloak had cornered Raisha and had an arrow nocked on his bow, pointed at Raisha’s heart. “Looks like he finally learned how to fight.”

Anuqi grinned as she saw Raisha raise her hands in surrender. The other mercenaries were soon dropping their weapons or running for the woods, Greencloaks on their heels.

“Let’s keep moving before they realize I’m missing,” Grif said. “Here, let me help you,” he said, slipping under Anuqi’s arm to help keep the weight off her ankle.

Anuqi leaned heavily on Grif as they walked, and smiled despite the pain as they slipped deeper into the woods.

“What now?” Grif asked as the sounds of battle faded and they made their way past a snow-covered farm.

“I have some friends I’d like you to meet,” Talon answered.

“Friends who will help us find Suka?” Anuqi asked through gritted teeth.

“Yes,” Talon said. “We’re not as numerous or powerful as the Greencloaks—or whoever Zerif is working for—but we care about Erdas. And we will do whatever it takes to get your spirit animals back.”

Anuqi glanced back along the path they’d come. The Greencloaks had looked dashing, swooping in for the rescue like that. But still, she had no desire to spend any more time with them than absolutely necessary, even if they had likely just saved her from a horrible fate at the hands of Zerif.

Let Zerif, Raisha, and the Greencloaks take care of each other, leaving their usual trail of destruction. Anuqi had all the friends she needed.



KOVO





REBEL BOND

By Billy Merrell

“CALM DOWN,” THE OLD MONK SAID. BUT TAKODA couldn’t. His arms were still shaking from the fight.

“Be calm,” Ananda repeated. Her soothing voice was a demonstration of calm, even as she commanded him to be still. Takoda looked up into her soft brown eyes, hoping she couldn’t hear the pounding in his chest.

He hated being told to calm down, as if the anger he felt was something he could control. As if he was wrong to feel outrage or hate after everything that had happened.

Ananda told Takoda to take a deep breath. She rested a graceful hand on his shoulder, so gently he could barely feel it. He closed his eyes and

breathed. Slowly his trembling subsided, but the bruises on his left cheek and right fist felt suddenly sore.

“Takoda,” Ananda said. “You can’t keep picking fights.”

He wanted to defend himself, to tell Ananda that it wasn’t him who started it this time. But that wasn’t entirely the truth.

Takoda couldn’t honestly remember what Sudo had even said. But he could remember the cruel face the boy had made as he teased Takoda. Sudo’s tongue had stuck out and his brow furrowed, as if the air itself tasted sour. His chapped lips had twisted into a sneer—and then gaped in surprise when Takoda leaped to defend himself.

Ananda glanced down at Takoda’s saffron robe, and her stoic, regal face gave way to disappointment. When he looked down, he realized the fabric was badly torn.

If Father was here, he could mend it, he thought bitterly. If he still had a father, he wouldn’t be here, getting in fights.

And then he thought of his mother, who was as beautiful and patient as Ananda was—but strong, too. Willing to fight for a good cause—like marrying a Zhongese man even though she was Niloan. Willing to go into battle against the Conquerors for their family.

Takoda squeezed his eyelids as tightly as he could, afraid of what would happen if he opened them.

He expected to be punished for what he’d done—Ananda was in charge of disciplining the acolytes, after all—but the gentle monk pulled him close instead. Takoda instinctively wanted to pull away, but stopped himself. It felt nice, listening to her breathing and imagining a future in which he might be as peaceful as Ananda.

“What would you have done,” she asked gently, “if you were at home?” Ananda let go, holding Takoda at arm’s length and looking him in the eyes.

It was the first time since Takoda arrived at the monastery that any of the monks had mentioned the home he’d lost. He gaped at her, too busy thinking about the question to piece together an answer.

“When you were upset about something, what would you have done then?” Ananda waited patiently.

“I would have run,” he confessed. Takoda thought about the savannahs that circled his village in southern Nilo, and how the shallow grass whipped in the wind for as far as the eye could see. He remembered how the combination of sweat and speed cooled his dark skin, even in the full sun. Being out in the grass helped clear his mind, helped him forget everything but the pace of his feet against the earth and the drum of his pulse in the air. He imagined the sky itself could hear his heart. The birds sang to its beat as they dipped close, as if cheering him on.

“I would have run until I couldn’t run anymore,” Takoda said.

The deep creases around Ananda’s eyes softened, and Takoda wondered if she wasn’t as nostalgic for wide open spaces as he was. She led them to sit together on the cool steps.

Surrounded by stone and sky, the temple was several miles from the closest field. Takoda knew because he had scanned the landscape from each of the monastery’s many majestic towers. It was perched on the rocky shore of a deep river, water to one side, forest on the other. Nowhere to run.

“Have you met Nambi?” Ananda asked, rolling up the stiff sleeve of her blue robe. Takoda shook his head. “Takoda, meet Nambi. Nambi, meet Takoda. I think you’ll be friends.”

There, on Ananda’s slender brown arm, rested the bold tattoo of a giraffe, sitting patiently with its legs folded under. “Nambi loves to run, too. And so do I,” Ananda explained. “But this monastery is no place for a giraffe, is it?” She was right, and the fact seemed to bring her great pain.

“So why are you here?” Takoda asked her, wondering how long Nambi had been forced to wait in passive state.

“To heal,” the old woman said. “Same as you. Sometimes it’s necessary for a person to be away from their place of comfort for a time.

Nambi will run again soon. And so will you, Takoda.”

Ananda rolled her sleeve back down and stood. She looked off toward the horizon, to where the sun hovered low in the sky. Takoda caught himself smiling as he looked up at her. He realized it had been a very long time since he'd smiled.

“As for your punishment ... ” she began.

Takoda's heart sank as he remembered the trouble he was in.

“You will take over Sudo's post in the west tower. Starting right now.” She pointed toward an entryway, beyond which stood the first shadowy steps of a very long climb. Takoda's eyes scanned the outer walls of the tower, up to where a distant belfry stood among the clouds.

“Three strikes,” Ananda said. “You'd better hurry.”

Takoda nodded, unable to look at her. He did as he was told, scurrying toward the entrance.

Peering up the spiral, he looked to where the highest stairs disappeared into darkness. Each of the ancient stone steps was worn down in the center, leaving a rounded impression so that no step was completely flat. Takoda couldn't help but wonder how many young monks had climbed the staircase before him, wearing a curve like that into the stone with nothing but their sandals. And all to ring a bell as the sun hit the horizon. Once at dawn, once at sunset.

Takoda hadn't run in over a year now. Even brief trips up and down stairs left him winded. He briefly wondered if he was up for the challenge. Hurrying, Takoda tried to count the steps as he took them.

It wasn't the same as running, but Takoda caught himself in a familiar pace. The soles of his sandals hit each second step in time, and his increasingly loud breaths echoed against the dark stones. Up and up and up.

Takoda thought of Sudo climbing. The bully's broad forehead creasing, covered with beads of sweat. At first it made Takoda angry, that what was once Sudo's punishment was now his own. But then Takoda managed to leave his annoyance behind, climbing past it up the spiral.

The boy's mind wandered to the savannah, and the sweet sting of the grass at his ankles. Up and up, Takoda thought of his home and of the feeling of exhaustion as he had returned from a run. His father would bring him water, not saying a word about where he had gone until he had been ready to speak. And his mother would watch on, a strange look of pride on her slender face.

Up and up and ever up, he climbed. When Takoda lost count, he refused to let it slow him down. Instead, he simply started over again from zero.

He thought of the last time he had seen each of his parents. Before the war ripped his family away, he remembered his mother waking him in the night to say good-bye. She had kissed his forehead, her braids pulled tightly back and her chest covered with armor. Takoda remembered it had hurt to hug her, the hard metal pressing against his chest.

His mother never came home.

Takoda thought of his father on the last morning he ever saw him. The Devourer's army was sweeping across Nilo. He remembered the fire in his father's eyes as he burned down their modest hut, hoping to trick the enemy into moving on without searching for survivors.

And then, finally, Takoda recalled his gentle father's deep-throated scream as the two of them were discovered hiding in the wreckage, covered in soot.

Up and up, Takoda remembered his father's last words as he commanded the boy to run. "Don't stop until you can't see smoke," he had said.

And Takoda hadn't stopped.

And he had survived.

He'd watched the horizon from the safety of trees on the far side of the savannah. He watched for a long time, afraid to close his eyes, until they began to twitch and tremble. Takoda had watched through the twilight and into the dark, scanning and scanning the shadows for his brave father, realizing he would never come.

Takoda was no longer thinking of climbing when he reached the top of the tower. The sudden brightness of the high windows startled him, like fire catching in his eyes. Pinprick stars speckled his vision as he leaned against the stone and struggled to catch his breath.

Remembering his duty, he found the large mallet hung on the tower wall and timed his first strike so that the first knell rang out deeply just as the sun hit the horizon.

Goooongggg!

Takoda could feel the vibrations on his arms and face. They tingled against his tender cheek. He struck the bell again.

Goooongggg!

This time it was as if the vibrations rang through his very thoughts. Takoda felt suddenly dizzy, as if the tower beneath him was quaking. His vision blurred and the tower seemed to darken all around him. Then—a flash! It was as if the sky had lit up with a flash of noon sun. But only for the briefest moment. In an instant, the light was gone.

Takoda blinked, seeing the same pinprick stars as before. *It must have been a reflection off the bell*, he told himself. But strangely, he sensed something had changed.

He remembered Ananda's instructions. "Three strikes," she had told him. Takoda's stomach twisted into a knot as he realized he'd already messed up the timing of the third toll. Monks all over the monastery must have heard his failure. Two tolls had rung out loud and clear, followed by deafening silence.

Takoda hurriedly lifted the hammer to strike the bell one last time. But as he aimed, he saw a terrifying face reflected in the curve of the metal. Deep-set eyes glared from above a snarling fanged mouth.

Snapping around, he saw that the same red eyes stared wildly at him from the top of the dark stairs.

Run! Takoda thought. But where?

A monster inched toward him from the shadows. As it stepped into the light, its face was revealed by the orange glow of the sunset.

A silverback gorilla.

Takoda hit the bell as hard as he could, hoping to scare the beast away.

Gooooooooonnnngggg!

But the ape's red eyes stayed fixed on Takoda's. The animal squinted at the boy, pulling itself forward on huge fists. A gust of wind blew through the bell tower, rustling the long black hair on the creature's arms. Each of its biceps were as thick as Takoda's waist.

Gooongggg! Gooongggg! Gooooooooonngggggg!

Takoda pounded and pounded the bell, hoping someone would hear the extra tolls as a warning—a call for help. The ape raised a clasping hand, reaching. For Takoda's arm? Or for the mallet? No! It was reaching for the bell. The gorilla pinched the rim with its hairy knuckles, muffling the sound. The knell cut short.

Takoda dropped the hammer, and it crashed by his feet.

“Run!” he heard his father say, but his legs wouldn't move.

Caught in the stare of the ape's red eyes, Takoda suddenly recognized him. There was only one gorilla in the history of Erdas with eyes like that.

Kovo.

All reason told Takoda that it was impossible, but he knew in his gut that he was right.

Suddenly, Takoda didn't want to run. He wanted to fight. Not only to hold his ground, but to hurt Kovo—kill him if he could. The gorilla was responsible for the deaths of his parents, and countless others across Erdas. He had masterminded not one, but *two* great wars.

But what was Kovo doing in the temple's bell tower?

The truth fell on Takoda like the setting of the sun, darkening the world. The strange flash of light ... The appearance of the ape, not as a gigantic Great Beast, but a normal-sized gorilla ...

Takoda had summoned a spirit animal, and it was the worst one who'd ever lived.

Even beneath his horror, Takoda felt the connection forming between them, an invisible tether pulling them closer. His skin tingled, and he longed to reach out a hand and touch the ape.

He fought the urge with everything he had.

Not knowing what else to do, Takoda screamed. Right in Kovo's monstrous face, as loudly and for as long as he could. All of the boy's breath seared through his throat in a single, extended blast.

Kovo screamed back instantly. His fanged jaws opened wide as he let out a terrible roar, twice as deep and loud as Takoda's. The boy could feel the ape's wet breath hit his face. Kovo was close enough and strong enough to crush Takoda like a bug if he wanted to, but Takoda went on screaming anyway, the sound all but lost beneath the ape's. Kovo roared, and the boy roared back, until he had nothing left in his lungs.

A dozen monks suddenly piled in, clambering up the stairs. They cast a huge net over the ape, like the ones the fishermen used to dredge the river.

Takoda didn't think it would do much to restrain the gorilla, but amazingly, Kovo didn't fight them. He just stared forward through the thick knots of rope.

Takoda looked around at the alarmed faces of the monks. One by one, they turned from the mysterious ape to Takoda. And when he looked back at Kovo, the ape was watching him, too, with unapologetic red eyes. As if he was figuring out the perfect way to destroy the boy.



“He’s a spirit animal now,” Ananda said, a hint of wonder in her usually calm voice. “*Your* spirit animal.”

The two sat together on the floor. They were in the monastery's granary, a large building full of simple silos that could be locked from the outside. Takoda had been hurried into just such a silo while the monks fetched Ananda.

Elsewhere in the granary, Kovo was locked inside another.

Spirit animal. Takoda couldn't get the words out of his head. His whole life, he had thought he knew what it meant to have one. Now he was no longer sure. What kind of *spirit* did Takoda have to be bonded with such a creature? Kovo was the most villainous, conniving wretch in the history of Erdas.

Takoda shook his head furiously. He didn't want to believe it.

"The pain you described," Ananda said. "The dizziness. That sinking feeling in your gut. It won't go away until your bond is complete. You have to touch him."

"No," he said. "I don't want to. I don't deserve any of this."

"It isn't a punishment, Takoda. It just *is*."

But it felt like a punishment. She was holding him captive, after all, there in one of the stone cells of the granary. The same as Kovo.

"Well, what if I refuse the bond?" he asked Ananda. Takoda couldn't stand the thought of looking into Kovo's bloodred eyes for the rest of his life, knowing what he had done. Besides, what if their bond made Takoda evil, too? What if a life of horror was the boy's destiny? He had to believe he had some choice in the matter.

Kovo began pounding the other side of the stone wall—a sound that had become familiar. It was as if he intended to break the wall apart to get to Takoda. After a while, the pounding subsided, followed by the duller sound of scraping.

How long would it take for Kovo to break down the wall, or to scrape the chains until he was free?

Another wave of pain washed over Takoda. He tried to hide it from Ananda, but she saw the boy's clenched jaw and curling toes. And then a new pain came, at the pit of his stomach. Until he thought he might throw up.

"That's it," Ananda said, standing. "If you won't go to Kovo, I'll bring him to you." Takoda begged her to stop, but Ananda ignored him. She unlatched the heavy granary door. The old hinges shrieked as she

pulled it open. Takoda started to follow her, but another spell of dizziness dragged the boy back to the ground. Kovo was beating the wall again, and with every vibration Takoda's head throbbed, as if it was the inside of his skull the ape was pounding.

Takoda could hear Ananda unlatch the door to Kovo's cell. Instantly, the pounding stopped. A moment later, he heard her open the door. But instead of the shrieking of hinges, all Takoda could hear was Ananda's voice, shrieking his name.

Takoda pushed himself up and stood, straining against the knot in his stomach. Kovo had taken away everyone the boy loved. Of course he would try to take Ananda from him too.

But as soon as Takoda passed through the doorway, he was relieved to see that Kovo hadn't hurt her. Instead, Ananda was standing inside the ape's cell, covering her mouth with her two hands. The horror on her face prepared Takoda for the worst, and yet still, when the boy looked into the room, it was as if the stone floor had dropped out from beneath him.

There were bright smears of blood all over the walls, where the gorilla had pounded and scraped his fists. Kovo himself sat placidly in the center of the cell. He was staring at Takoda again, as intensely as he had before. Only now his knuckles were as crimson as his treacherous eyes.

Kovo's eyes. Looking into them, the pain and dizziness subsided. Takoda hated it, but it was as if the ape's terrible gaze was healing him somehow.

Takoda looked away, preferring any pain to even the slightest pang of kinship with the beast. But it was too late. The sickness he felt was nearly gone, replaced by the familiar yearning to reach out and make contact with the animal.

Breathe, he told himself. As he did, the boy's nostrils filled with the metallic smell of blood. Takoda looked around the cell walls, and something puzzled him.

The room was covered in Kovo's blood. But that didn't make any sense. The stories of the ape had always said he was very clever—if Kovo was trying to knock the wall down, he should have pounded the same few stones until they cracked. And yet he'd painted the room with his own blood.

"I'm going to get help," Ananda said, rushing from the room.

When Takoda turned to follow her, Kovo sprang toward him with alarming speed. The gorilla was stopped short, thanks to a heavy chain attached to a collar at his throat. Kovo lifted a fist in Takoda's direction and held it out. More blood seeped from the fresh wounds.

"What do you want?" Takoda asked him furiously. "What more could you possibly want from me?"

But Kovo was no longer looking him in the eyes. He was staring at the boy's clenched fists, dangling at his sides. Kovo glanced at his own fist, then back at Takoda's. Then he turned his hand over, and the fist unfolded into an open palm.

"I'm nothing like ... " Takoda said to the monster. But the words caught in his throat as he wondered if it was true. His bruised fist was still sore from his fight with Sudo, even though he could barely remember why he had punched him.

"Forget it," Takoda said, turning again to leave. He didn't care if walking away from Kovo made him sick and dizzy. He refused to give his enemy what he wanted.

Kovo pounded the ground and grunted impatiently. When Takoda turned around, the gorilla was scraping the floor with his blood, leaving a half-circle smear on the dirty stone. Kovo looked up at him wildly, and then back at his own fist, still pressed to the ground. Kovo then scraped a zigzag, before staring up at the boy again.

Takoda didn't know what response the ape was waiting for, but when he didn't give it to him, Kovo furrowed his brow. He scraped another zigzag above the first, but it left no blood. The grit from the granary floor had caked onto his wounded knuckles.

Kovo pounded the ground again, until there was fresh blood dripping from the ape's hand. Staring at him hard, Kovo painted a bright zigzag in the exact place he had tried to before.

"It's a drawing," Takoda said, and Kovo nodded.

Looking around the cell walls again, the boy no longer saw only chaotic smears. Instead, he noticed one image repeated again and again. It was of gigantic fanged jaws, wide open, howling, baring teeth—all drawn in Kovo's blood.

Hovering within each gaping mouth was a bloody spiral.

Ananda startled Takoda, setting a bucket of blue-green liquid at his feet. She handed him a rag and ordered him to clean Kovo's wounds.

"He's trying to communicate something to me."

"Of course he is," Ananda said. "You're his human partner."

Takoda wanted so badly for her to be wrong. But he knew already that she wasn't. He could feel the bond forming with Kovo, even without their touching.

And he could feel the difference inside himself. Some inner strength he thought had died with his mother had found its way back to him.

But Kovo is evil, he wanted to say to Ananda. At least, the other Kovo had been. But with the ape staring at Takoda, his bleeding knuckles pressing into the stone, the boy couldn't bring himself to say it.

"Maybe you'll bring out the best in him," Ananda told Takoda gently. And with that she closed the door, leaving him alone with his spirit animal.

Takoda wet the rag with liquid from the bucket, his pulse quickening. He took one step closer to Kovo, then paused. The menacing ape held out a dirty, blood-caked fist. Takoda reached for it slowly with the rag, his hand shaking. Without warning, Kovo snatched the rag out of the boy's hand and threw it to the ground with a splat.

Then Kovo raised his fist out to him again.

Takoda knew what the gorilla was waiting for. And deep down he knew he was waiting for it too. It was as if a spark of energy was

humming in the air between them.

Takoda closed his eyes, searching inside himself, desperately trying to commit his own thoughts and feelings to memory—if for no other reason than to know afterward if something had changed.

Takoda reached out and pressed his smaller fist to Kovo's.



The bond with Kovo had formed like skin over an old wound. It hadn't healed the feelings of distrust Takoda had for him. Instead, it had merely buried them, so that Takoda could think of more than death when he looked into Kovo's eyes. So that the boy didn't hear the ape's gibber and think only about his father screaming for him to run.

But when Takoda was startled by a feeling he couldn't place, he realized it might be part of their bond.

That night he woke up in a panic, only to find Kovo staring at him from the corner of his room. The ape had been chained to the wall, though the monks had left some blankets and pillows for him, which sat unused in a pile.

Takoda blinked through the darkness, shaking away the nightmare that had woken him.

"Can you feel me, too?" he asked after a moment. "From your side of the bond?"

Kovo looked away, disinterested. Takoda was starting to suspect that Kovo was even less pleased with their pairing than he himself was.

Kovo pointed to the door impatiently.

"It isn't time to ring the bell yet," Takoda said tiredly, lying back again.

But Kovo grunted and pointed, not letting the boy go back to sleep. Eventually Takoda gave in. He sighed and threw his legs over the bed, then shambled over to Kovo and unlocked his shackles from the wall.

Kovo followed him out the door, toward the west tower. It was early morning, not yet dawn. The ape moved slowly, his two large nostrils taking in the morning forest air as it poured through the monastery. Takoda tried again to engage the ape with questions, but he was almost entirely unresponsive.

The only rise he was able to get out of the gorilla was when Takoda chained him to the foot of the tower. Kovo seemed alarmed that he would leave him behind, and tugged at the iron collar with his bandaged hands.

“You can come with me, if you don’t get in my way,” Takoda told him. “But you have to hurry.”

Kovo snorted derisively, and when Takoda freed him, Kovo bounded up the stairs ahead of the boy.

Kovo raced up the spiral far faster than Takoda had expected, considering his massive size. Takoda had heard of people who could access the strengths of their spirit animals. He tried to focus on his bond as he made his way up the tower, much more slowly than Kovo. But the climb didn’t feel any faster than before.

When Takoda finally reached the top, Kovo was standing majestically on his four massive limbs, his back arched as he stared out over the horizon. He studied the distance, as if he was waiting for something or someone to appear.

“If you’re watching for the sunrise, then you’re looking in the wrong direction,” Takoda told him. Kovo gave no response.

When the sun finally appeared, it was little more than a sliver of bright red light on the horizon, not yet lighting the full sky. When Takoda suddenly rang the bell, it startled Kovo. He spun around, his deep-set eyes wide with panic. Takoda stifled a laugh as the infamous ape scowled at him.

Then Kovo turned and continued watching out the far window of the bell tower as Takoda delivered a second and then a third toll.

On the way down, the boy asked Kovo once again about their bond.

“What powers will you give me?” he asked. Again he was ignored. It was as if they weren’t bonded at all, and Takoda was nothing to Kovo but a pest. “Come on,” he said. “Will I be stronger? Faster? Smarter?”

But all Takoda felt was annoying.



When Takoda saw Sudo later that morning, the older boy avoided his eye. Takoda wondered if it was possible that Sudo had learned his lesson from their fight. More likely, it was the four-hundred-pound gorilla following Takoda throughout the monastery.

Kovo sniffed the air loudly as they passed the bully, then blew out again quickly. The gorilla grimaced, as if he smelled something foul, looking up at Sudo’s frown. A few of the monks laughed as Sudo backed away, blushing.

Walking on, Takoda was nearly certain he noticed a brief smile appear on Kovo’s menacing face.

Before the midday chant, Ananda came to Takoda’s room. She handed him a satchel with charcoal and a scroll of papyrus. The boy expected her to dole out additional punishment, asking him to transcribe monastery doctrine from memory, or to use it for something equally tedious. So he was surprised when she explained what the scroll was for.

“It’s for Kovo,” she said. “So he can draw in a more productive manner.”

Ananda then handed Takoda a package. It was wrapped ceremoniously, as if it were a special gift.

Kovo watched suspiciously as Takoda unwrapped it. Inside, the boy found a new monastery robe. This one was blue, like Ananda’s, instead of the warmer saffron. There wasn’t a stain or tear to be found on the luxurious garment.

“You have a spirit animal now,” she said. “You should dress accordingly.”

“Should I change into it now?” Takoda asked her, unable to contain his excitement. “Is it okay if I wear it to meditation?”

“About that ... ” Ananda said. She sighed, taking the robe back from him. She folded it and packed it neatly into the satchel. Then the old monk glanced over Takoda’s shoulder, toward the doorway.

There, standing in the midday sun, was a light-skinned boy with golden hair. He was about Takoda’s height, but that seemed to Takoda to be the only thing the two of them had in common. At least, until a large wolf with cobalt blue eyes followed the boy into the room.

Upon seeing the two together, Takoda knew instantly who they were. He gaped at the heroic duo, then flushed when the boy nodded at him.

“Takoda, this is Conor,” Ananda said. “I need you to trust him. He’s here to take you and Kovo to a safer place.”

Ananda must have known the words would hurt Takoda, because she said them with a great deal of compassion. Still, all Takoda could hear was that he was about to lose his home again. Along with the closest thing he had to a family. And what was Takoda to believe he was gaining, other than an infamously treacherous spirit animal who wanted nothing to do with him?

Kovo.

And that’s what this was really about, wasn’t it? The gorilla was perhaps the greatest villain in the history of Erdas. As a Great Beast he had nearly destroyed the world—twice. The Greencloaks would never let so dangerous a creature out of their sight again. That was what Ananda meant by taking them to a safer place—safer for the rest of the world.

What will they think of me? Takoda wondered. The boy who summoned Kovo?

In the stories Takoda had heard of the four heroes of Erdas, Conor was always described as the kind one. He was the gentle shepherd, forced by circumstance to be a hunter and leader. And yet the young Greencloak seemed to be wrestling with his anger as he gazed at Kovo chained to the wall.

Briggan didn't even try. The wolf growled openly at the ape, his hackles rising. Takoda remembered his father telling him that Kovo had killed Briggan himself, back when the two were both still Great Beasts.

The ape watched them both impassively, his brooding red eyes practically glowing in the sunlight. If he was surprised to see his former enemies, his face didn't show it.

"That's him all right," Conor said, taking a breath. He pushed his hand into Briggan's fur and the wolf calmed somewhat, his growl slowly fading.

A wave of despair fell over Takoda. The Greencloaks would hate *him*, too, just because he was bonded to Kovo. All of Erdas would hate him.

"Neither of you are safe here," Conor said, as if he knew something that they didn't. "There's someone out there hunting the Great Beasts." His blue eyes met Takoda's, and Takoda was surprised by what he saw there. Pity ... and worry.

Only then did Takoda begin to believe what Ananda had told him. He was not safe. And neither was Kovo.

But what safer place could there have been than the isolated Niloan monastery, wedged between virgin forest and the mouth of a guarded river?

"Zerif knows where you are," Conor said nervously. "It's only a matter of time. We really need to hurry."

Zerif? Takoda was sure he'd heard the name before. Something about the war.

Takoda had nothing but questions for Conor. *Why me? Why has Kovo returned? Isn't the war over?* But Conor was already out the door, the gray wolf leading the way.

Kovo beat his chest, gibbering at Takoda urgently to unlock his chains from the wall. He *wanted* to go with the Greencloaks?

Takoda didn't feel ready. He glanced around his modest room. He had no belongings, other than the satchel in Ananda's hands. She rushed to

unlock Kovo's chains, then stepped to Takoda and threw the satchel's leather strap over his head.

Takoda stared up into the monk's kind eyes, trying to think of what to say. But nothing came. Ananda hugged him tightly, not saying a word. The hug wasn't nearly long enough when Kovo interrupted, pulling Takoda roughly from Ananda and toward the doorway.

Takoda couldn't help but think of his mother's final embrace, and how the metal armor had hurt his chest. Ananda's hug hurt, too. Possibly worse, because this time Takoda knew it was a good-bye. Probably forever.

Kovo's muscular fist tugged him down the corridor. Takoda turned back to see the monk wiping tears from her eyes. When she saw him she smiled, holding up her bright palm.

"Now you get to run," Ananda called after Takoda.

And run they did.

Takoda chased Kovo down a long arcade, barely able to keep up with him. They turned, rushing down a brightly lit corridor, and then raced up a tall flight of stairs, a crowd of old monks and students leaping out of the way. Takoda thought he saw Sudo among them, but he was running too fast up the stairs to look back. When they reached the top, he spied Conor pointing toward something in the sky.

An eagle was circling high above the monastery. Takoda squinted to look, covering his eyes from the glare of the noon sun.

"It's Halawir!" Conor gasped. "Zerif is closer than I thought. We have to find a quicker way to the river."

Briggan leaped over the edge of the walkway, splashing into an elevated aqueduct below. Conor did the same, and Kovo and Takoda followed, jumping less elegantly into the cold channel of shallow water. They followed the flow, high above the cloisters and gardens of the monastery. Takoda carried his satchel above his head, the swift water tugging at his ankles and waist as Kovo tore off in front of him, water splashing in all directions.

Then, with as little warning as Takoda had been given before, Conor climbed over the channel's edge and jumped down. Takoda leaned to look, half expecting to see the boy's lush green cloak still falling through the air. Instead, he found Conor splashing into a second channel, only ten feet down at most.

"Maybe now's not the best time to tell you all this, but I can't swim very well," Takoda said between breaths. But none of them seemed to be listening.

Takoda paused, afraid to jump into the deeper water. Kovo reached for him. Or was he reaching for the satchel?

The ape thumped his back. It must have been just a gentle pat for the gorilla, but Takoda was sent sprawling forward into the water. A moment later, Kovo landed beside him with an enormous splash.

Together, the group waded through even more rapid water. Takoda hurried to keep up, but he was clumsy and out of his element. Eventually, they climbed out over a ledge, between two massive pillars that marked the entrance to the infirmary.

Briggan paused to shake water droplets from his silvery coat as the rest of them caught their breath. Huffing, Conor stared at the sky again.

Takoda looked up and saw Halawir circling closer, as if to signal the group's exact location. It cried out, the shrill sound echoing throughout the stone architecture of the monastery.

Conor started to lead them down another set of stairs, heading toward an open courtyard.

"No!" Takoda called after him. "This way!" He pointed toward the double doors of the infirmary. "There's a passage inside. No one will see us."

Takoda showed the group inside, where a staircase led past storerooms of medicinal herbs, and then all the way down to ground level. It was a massive shortcut, and Takoda felt briefly proud for having helped a hero like Conor find his way.

At the foot of the stairs, they sprinted down the row of granary cells. Water was still dripping off Takoda's robe, and he was careful not to slip on the stones. Behind him, Takoda heard Kovo's chains jangling as he knuckled along. They dashed through the granary exit, and eventually out through the mill.

Then it was Briggan's turn to lead again. He sniffed the outside air, choosing which direction would lead them toward the river. But as he rounded the base of the mill house, the wolf stopped in his tracks fifty feet or more from the edge of a stretch of farmland.

There was a rustling among the wheat crops, and with each passing moment the sound intensified. Out of the tall stalks a savage-looking boar appeared. Its white tusks flashed brightly as it leaped out of the shade and into the sunlight, charging toward the group.

Kovo rose onto his hind legs and beat his black chest with his fists, ready to attack. But Briggan barked at the gorilla and swiftly changed course, leading them away in the opposite direction.

"There will be others. Too many to fight," Conor rushed to explain. Then he followed the cue of his spirit animal, sprinting away.

Kovo stood down, but not without first baring his fangs at the approaching beast. The boar snorted, flaring its nostrils as it dashed toward them with alarming speed.

They fled uphill between the forest and the outer wall of the monastery. But the boar was gaining on them. Takoda ran as fast as he could, his robe clinging to his legs. The other three quickly outpaced him, and Takoda feared at any moment he would feel the boar's tusks stab and slice the back of his tired calves.

Takoda could only move so quickly without tripping over rocks. By the time he had caught up with the other three, they were sprinting along the perimeter of the monastery.

As soon as he lost sight of their enemy, Takoda wanted to rest. But the group rushed farther, up a rocky slope. It was steep, and soon none of them were running, but pulling themselves up boulder by boulder.

Briggan barked, and when Takoda looked up, he saw yet another foe had appeared.

A ram with huge curled horns reared back, high above them on the rocks. Bright sunlight glared from behind the animal, stinging Takoda's eyes. The ram bayed loudly. Then it, too, charged at the four. Its hooves clattered sharply as they hit the stones. For a moment Takoda stared in awe of the creature's speed, navigating the steep rocks as it barreled forward, lowering its horns. It was as if the ram was carrying the full force of the wind behind him as he raced down the rocks, ready to pummel them all with his bony skull.

Briggan and Conor leaped out of the way, off the rocks, followed by Kovo. But Takoda's sandals were slippery. As he rushed to push off the boulder he was climbing, he slid, twisting his ankle and then falling forward and skinning his knees with a crash.

Takoda looked up to see Kovo leaping back up into the ram's path. The gorilla leaned into the wind with his palms open, like a wrestler readying himself. The ram bayed again, charging at full speed. The shrill sound of the animal's battle cry multiplied as it echoed between the jagged rocks and the high monastery wall.

Takoda crouched, curling up between rocks. The boy knew the force of the ram was enough to send Kovo flying backward into him. Instead, the ape caught the ram by the horns, just before the moment of impact. Kovo twisted, redirecting the momentum of the massive animal and tossing him downhill, right over Takoda's head. The boy turned in time to see the ram tumble, his four hooves cutting into the soil right in front of the stumbling boar. Together the two rolled far down the slope.

Kovo stood tall on his hind legs, beating his chest. He roared loudly down at them, looming over Takoda.

When Kovo was finished, Takoda tried to stand, but he couldn't. Seeing him falter, the ape lifted Takoda from under his arms and carried him onto his back. Then he ambled into the forest with the others.

Takoda held on tight to Kovo's dark hair. Panic still quaked in his blood. His ears were ringing.

For a moment Takoda thought the questions he had about Kovo's loyalty were answered. He didn't have to save him, after all. And yet Kovo did, blocking him from harm with his own body. But then he remembered the satchel around his neck, and he wondered if it was the papyrus Kovo cared about instead. Or maybe the gorilla was simply itching for a fight, a creature of perpetual war.

Whatever Kovo's reasons, Takoda was grateful. He clung to the ape's back, hoping Kovo could feel it.

"This way," Conor yelled, and the three followed him, crashing through low branches along a steep creek. Takoda pushed his face into Kovo's fur as leaves scraped the back of his neck. Twigs caught on the strap of the satchel, snapping as they broke. But Takoda held on.

Before he knew it, Takoda could feel Kovo standing taller on his four limbs. Takoda felt the dappled sunshine hit his back, and then full sun. When he looked up, he saw the river. It gleamed blue and green, light twinkling at the far water's edge, where a boat waited at the end of a long dock.

"Kalani! Get the boat ready for launch!" Conor screamed. A Greencloak on the boat waved back to him, then hurried to untie the ropes. Takoda squinted, trying to make out what her spirit animal might be, but couldn't find any sign of one. Then he noticed a spray of mist from the water beside the boat, and realized a dolphin was swimming alongside it.

Conor and Briggan ran toward the dock, despite their exhaustion.

Kovo followed at first, but soon he was dashing forward at full speed. Takoda held on tightly as they gained on the others. Kovo raced toward the water as if his life depended on it. And perhaps it did. Perhaps all of theirs did.

Kovo passed Conor, Takoda riding on the ape's back. And then they passed Briggan, too, as they neared the dock.

But as Kovo approached it, a huge white bear crashed out of the water, blocking his way. Startled, Kovo jolted to the side, and Takoda lost his grip. The boy tumbled to the ground again, nearly rolling into the water. His satchel was thrown from his shoulder and onto the muddy ground.

The bear growled loudly. Then it stood on its hind legs, taller than even Kovo. It roared through open jaws, river water pouring onto the dock from its matted white fur. Then it let itself fall back to standing, its two front paws hitting the wood planks with a heavy bang.

Kovo roared ferociously, gnashing his teeth. Briggan snarled from behind the ape, still running toward the dock.

Kalani, the Greencloak on the boat, cried out for the group to hurry, a rope coiled tightly in her hands. Takoda could see that she was struggling to hold the boat in place against the river's current.

The white bear swatted a huge paw in Kovo's direction as the two faced off. Kovo burst forward suddenly, his enormous hand snatching a fistful of the polar bear's fur. But just as it looked like Kovo might win the upper hand, the bear disappeared into a flash of light.

"Children," Takoda heard a snide voice say. "Where do you think you're going?"

They all turned to see a bearded man walking toward them. His dark tunic was open at his chest, caught in a chilling breeze. There on his chest, stretching high onto the muscles of his shoulder, was the tattoo of the white bear. And across from it, an outstretched boar. The ram and eagle were partially visible as well.

Takoda wondered, *How many spirit animals can one person have? How many others are hidden under that tunic?*

But as frightening as the sight of all those tattoos might have been, it was the mark on the man's forehead that turned the boy's blood cold. The same bloody spiral from Kovo's drawings pulsed there, like a third eye.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but you won’t get away with it, Zerif,” Conor said. The man ignored him.

As Zerif stepped toward them, a wicked smile stretched across his face. Kovo stumbled backward, nearly crushing the satchel. The ape picked it up and slung the leather strap around his own neck.

Takoda pushed himself to his feet. His ankle was tender, but it wasn’t broken. *If we all make a run for the boat, will I make it? he thought. Or will they leave me behind?*

Zerif reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black bottle. Briggan growled from the dock as soon as he saw it. Takoda looked wildly from the boat to Conor, and from Briggan to Kovo. Every one of them stood frozen in anticipation as Zerif pulled out the cork stopper. But not Takoda.

“Run!” he screamed, not waiting to see what evil was about to be unleashed. He dashed as quickly as he could up the dock and toward the boat, with Kovo following his lead. Kalani passed him the taut rope. Then she drew a throwing spear from the floor, and before Takoda knew what was happening behind him, she drove it heavily toward Zerif.

Takoda turned to see if the spear had hit, but it was Conor who cried out in pain. He had accidentally run into the spear’s path. He covered a wound on his wrist, pulling his arm to his chest.

“No!” Kalani cried.

Briggan knocked Zerif to the ground, but the man freed himself almost immediately. He grabbed the wolf by the scruff of his neck and managed to lift the massive animal off the ground as he stood.

“At last!” Zerif cackled, raising the bottle to Briggan’s snout. Takoda watched as something small and dark twisted inside the glass.

All eyes were on the bottle as Conor threw himself into Zerif’s side. Briggan fell to the ground, and so did the bottle. It bounced and rolled quickly toward the river. But before falling into the rushing water, something dark writhed out of it and onto the wet ground. It was a worm, or a slug. Takoda wasn’t sure, but he watched it in horror. Whatever it

was, it slithered in Briggan's direction with otherworldly speed. It moved like a shadow across the ground, twisting over rocks and bubbling across the surface of a mud puddle.

Briggan yelped and whined, tripping over the foot of the dock as he tried desperately to back away. Conor freed himself from Zerif's grip, pushing to his feet. He pulled out his ax and struck the worm, mere inches away from the wolf's paw. Then Conor stomped at the ground violently as Zerif stood, the same strange smile on his face.

Conor must have seen it, too, because he made a break for it, down the dock. He and Briggan leaped on board just as Takoda let go of the rope. Immediately, the boat jolted forward, downstream.

Kalani rushed to Conor, hurrying to care for the wound her spear had left at the boy's wrist. As Takoda watched, feeling helpless, he was startled by a slither of movement at his neck. It was only Kovo, returning the satchel. Still, he shuddered involuntarily, thinking of the strange worm on the dock.

"Thank you," Takoda said as the ape lowered the strap around the boy's neck.

Takoda and Kovo turned to watch Zerif as the boat hurried away. The boy expected him to send Halawir into the air after them, or perhaps there was some slithering sea serpent he'd let lose into the water with a flash.

Instead, the menacing man simply waved from the shore, the same unmistakable smirk on his face.

"What was that?" Takoda asked Kovo. But the ape didn't have an answer.

Just then, they heard Conor drop his ax.

When Takoda looked, he saw a severed half of the worm twisting up Conor's middle finger and the back of his hand. Conor tried desperately to shake the worm loose and into the water, but it was much too quick.

Before any of them knew what was happening, it wiggled into the wound at Conor's wrist, then disappeared. Conor clamped a hand down

over the wrist, hissing between his teeth.

Takoda gasped, and Kalani's hands covered her mouth.

Conor's eyes were wide, staring down at his wrist. Whatever was happening beneath the skin, he covered it from view of the others.

"What was that thing?" Takoda asked. "What ... what do we do?"

Conor seemed to come to. He pulled his wrist weakly to his chest, casting a glance at Takoda. There was so much in that look—fear, anger, disappointment. Takoda himself had felt those very same things the moment he summoned Kovo.

He's wondering if I'm worth it, Takoda realized bleakly.

"We have to get to Greenhaven," Conor said. His voice was tight with barely restrained emotion. "I have a feeling things are about to get worse."



GERATHON





BETRAYAL

By Brandon Mull

RROOTS AND VINES SNAGGED AT HER ANKLES AS RAISHA made her way along the uneven path between the ferny shrubs, a yoke across her shoulders, water buckets dangling at either end. Dense branches interlocked overhead, filtering the sun's rays into a greenish twilight. The steamy air tasted of damp leaves. Perspiration greased her skin.

She tromped forward, the muscles in her legs burning, her sense of balance faltering. High above, monkeys shrieked and tropical birds squawked. Who knew what else prowled unseen in the underbrush? The jungles of southern Zhong housed many predators, including tigers, leopards, and giant constrictors.

Would it be so bad to become a meal for a tiger? What if a venomous snake struck her?

No. The guards wouldn't allow it. Death would be a form of escape. They'd find a way to intervene. If a giant constrictor swallowed her, who would haul water from the outpost? Urban's precious mule might have to pitch in.

Somewhere up ahead, concealed by trees and foliage, loomed the Mire, a Greencloak prison built on an island of muck in the midst of a tropical swamp. Dripping cells, mossy yards, and leaning towers combined to form a hideous abomination of iron, stone, and mildew—the entire complex slowly sinking into the bog.

Raisha had first arrived with escape on her mind. But tight security, high walls, and the surrounding wetlands soon showed her why the Greencloaks had transferred her there. Prisoners did not escape from the Mire. The other inmates seemed resigned to their fate.

Multiple wells inside the prison offered fresh water, but the prison's warden insisted that those in her custody haul their own water from the nearest Greencloak outpost in order to get exercise. Raisha suspected the real reason was to exhaust and dishearten the inmates by working them like slaves. But the chore did provide certain opportunities....

"Pick up the pace," Urban called over his shoulder. A pudgy man astride a mule, the Greencloak's dark eyes glared at her from beneath a sloppy crown of knotted rags.

Grunting, Raisha walked faster. Every other day since arriving at this awful place, she had followed Urban on his mule from the outpost, watching the animal's furry haunches rock from side to side as it plodded along.

But today things were a bit different. Today she had poured extra water into her buckets—twice the normal load. Working hard was part of her plan.

"I'm twelve," she reminded Urban.

“Old enough to commit adult crimes and get sent to a very adult prison,” Urban said. “Only criminals designated as threats to all of Erdas join us here in the tropics.”

“I was used,” Raisha insisted.

“You helped to separate people from their spirit animals,” Urban accused. “Is any crime more despicable?”

“It’s a favor if your spirit animal is a mule,” Raisha said, panting.

“Brave words from somebody without an animal companion,” Urban scoffed. “Good thing you don’t have one. The poor creature would have little freedom.”

Raisha still harbored a hope that she might summon an animal one day. But no way was she going to share that with this annoying guard. “Isn’t your mule just as trapped as my animal would be?”

Urban gave a derisive laugh. “Lucky loves the jungle, don’t you, boy?” He patted the mule. “We’re only at the Mire part of each day. And our assignment here will end in a year or so. What are your prospects? Thirty years, minimum, if I remember.”

“Yes,” Raisha said, lowering her eyes.

The Greencloak rode in silence for a few blessed moments. “Come now,” Urban said finally, his voice softening a touch. “You have to accept what you did. You were caught and now you’re here. It’s reality—but this doesn’t have to be the end for you. Take responsibility for your crimes. Shape up. You can still make something of yourself.”

Raisha would have scoffed if she weren’t running out of breath. Who was this guy to talk? Some backwoods turnkey on a shabby mule. She didn’t want or need encouragement from her captors.

Bowing her head, she concentrated on walking. She’d made this trek several times now, and it was never easy, but the extra water she had added was making it impossible. Her legs were rubbery, and her balance was becoming untrustworthy. She staggered, sloshing water from the buckets.

Urban snapped at the convict ahead of him. Raisha wondered if she might actually faint. The plan was to become so exhausted that when she faked passing out, it would look real enough to fool her jailor. If she actually lost consciousness, she could miss her chance to make an escape. And if she kept pushing, truly fainting was possible.

Who needed to scale walls if the guards took you on a walk through the jungle every other day? A chain was only as strong as the weakest link, and a prison wall only served if you remained inside.

Raisha needed to make her move soon, before they reached the marshier part of the jungle around the Mire. She was willing to risk running through dense vegetation, whether or not hidden predators lurked among the fronds and reeds—but the gloomy waters of the swamp were too forbidding.

A root decided the matter. Raisha tripped, dropping the yoke. Buckets clattered and water splashed. She stayed down, her cheek on the firm, warm mud of the trail. The ground seemed to gently teeter.

“On your feet!” Urban barked.

He sounded distant. Oh no. Maybe she really *would* fade off to sleep.

“Give me a break,” he grumbled. Raisha heard his boots slap the mud as he dismounted. She heard him tromp over to her. Her breathing was labored. She tried to keep it regular.

A boot slid under her ribs and flipped her onto her back. Now was the crucial moment. She did her best to stay limp. A chance for escape depended on it.

“What’s the holdup?” a guard asked from behind where Raisha had fallen.

“On your feet,” Urban demanded again. Raisha gave no reaction and let the pause stretch out.

“She’s playing possum,” said the guard from behind.

Raisha felt a finger slide into her nostril. Fear, will, and sheer exhaustion helped her resist flinching. The finger poked inside her ear.

There came a pause. Then a hand slapped her cheek hard enough to sting. She kept her body slack.

“She might really be out,” Urban said, a touch of concern in his voice.

“Drag her to the side,” the other guard suggested. “Let us pass. Then tie her up and throw her on Lucky.”

“Will do,” Urban replied.

Strong hands seized her ankles and Raisha felt herself sliding through mud, out of the way. Then she heard other inmates and guards passing.

If she waited until she was tied up, Raisha knew she would have no chance to escape. Timing would be everything.

As she heard the last of the procession passing, she opened her eyes a crack. Urban stood beside his stinky mule, uncoiling a length of rope.

“Don’t turn your back on her,” the last guard cautioned. “Want me to stay around?”

“Go on ahead,” Urban said. “I won’t be far behind. If I can’t handle a young girl, what use am I?”

A fair question, Raisha thought.

“She’s no ordinary young girl,” the other guard warned.

“She committed unordinary crimes,” Urban said. “But she’s nothing extraordinary.”

The dismissive comment made Raisha’s cheeks burn beneath the streaks of mud. The problem was, he had a point. She hadn’t accomplished her missions through abnormal strength or speed or agility. As an unassuming girl without a spirit animal, the daughter of a prosperous merchant, she had used her normalcy to her advantage. She could go places many people couldn’t go without being questioned. If she got caught somewhere she shouldn’t be, she could pretend she had lost her way. Who was going to arrest a respectable young girl who seemed accidentally lost—or perhaps had gotten a little curious?

But now she had been unmasked. Anonymity no longer protected her. She couldn’t make excuses or invoke the name of her father to dodge trouble.

And there was no way she was going to overpower a Greencloak guard, even slovenly Urban.

But she might be able to run from him.

If she got a head start and raced wildly, taking risks he was unwilling to take, maybe she could create some distance and slip away. The dense jungle held perils, but nothing so fearsome as thirty years in a sinking cage.

The last Greencloak guard in the procession passed out of view around a bend in the trail. Urban still stood beside his mule, cutting the rope. He was only seven or eight paces from Raisha, but the guard would never be farther away or more distracted before coming to bind her.

Wishing she felt a little less exhausted, Raisha rolled over and pushed herself quickly to her feet. She charged into the lush undergrowth. Broad fronds parted in a series of limp slaps. Pliable branches yielded to her legs. She weaved around trunks and plunged through shrubs.

“Raisha, no!” Urban called. “Don’t be a fool!”

She heard him crash into the undergrowth behind her, prompting a frantic surge of speed. Heart hammering, she shot forward, hurdling a fallen log shaggy with moss.

Without the buckets, her body felt light. She might be small, but she was quick, and Urban’s bulky size would hinder him in the dense foliage. She darted through a stand of bamboo, making the cluster of poles clack and rattle. Raisha cursed between heaving breaths. The noise would signal her exact location to anyone with half a brain.

“Raisha!” Urban yelled, revealing that she had already gained a little ground on him. “Halt! Come back before you get hurt!”

Raisha’s mind raced almost as fast as her heart. No way would she get duped by his desperate bluff. If she got away, yes, she would be lost in the jungle. And that involved a host of dangers. But if she headed northeast, she would eventually reach Xin Kao Dai and the surrounding villages. The reward was worth the hazards.

Blinking hard, Raisha fought off a bout of light-headedness. Her body really had been exhausted. Wouldn't that be perfect if she passed out now? No! She might never get another chance like this.

Gritting her teeth, Raisha charged ahead through a curtain of vines.

And suddenly she was on the ground, arms pinned against her torso, legs lashed together. The vines had collapsed around her like a dozen constrictors. No. It was netting—a trap concealed in the vines.

Raisha bucked and squirmed, but the net only embraced her tighter. Her head ached and the ground seemed to rock beneath her. She stopped struggling and lay on her back, hot and sweaty, staring up at layers of leafy limbs that blocked out all but the tiniest glimpses of blue sky, minuscule windows of freedom.

“Are you all right?” Urban called, not too far off now.

“I'm not dead,” Raisha responded mirthlessly.

“Then you're fortunate,” Urban said. She could hear him bulling his way through the foliage as he drew nearer. “We've been using this trail for decades. There are traps all over the place. And before long, you would have reached waterways that connect to the swamp. Did you honestly think running was an option?”

Raisha didn't answer. Why wouldn't a hungry tiger just come eat her?

Then the furry head of a mule entered her field of vision. Showing its teeth, the animal brayed in a way that Raisha could only conclude was laughter.



Indirect sunlight filtered into the cell through a long shaft in the ceiling too narrow for her to enter. A rusty grate protected the mouth of the shaft, and iron bars crisscrossed beyond at intervals. By the weak light, Raisha watched water rippling down one wall and across the floor to a congested drain.

This was her third day in solitary confinement in one of the wet cells. The volume of water on the ground varied, but was seldom less than an inch, or more than three. The prisoners whispered that the entire floor of this wing would eventually sink into the bog, as the floor below it had done years ago.

Upon her arrival in solitary, Raisha had been told by her jailors that there would be no more fresh water coming, so her best chance for a semi-sanitary drink was to lick it off the walls. After several hours scantily slurping water that tasted of minerals and mildew, some guards brought her a pitcher of water and a hunk of stale bread. Their laughter still echoed in her mind.

Raisha huddled on her cot—the one place in her cell where she could keep dry. For the millionth time, she cursed herself for getting caught. Everything had been going so well! Her life had been an adventure! Working for Zerif had been a glorious, empowering game. Before Zerif entered her life, Raisha had always felt ignored. Her father doted on her brothers. Her mother obsessed about their place in society. Raisha had no real companionship, and no real destiny. But she had used the invisibility that comes with being ignored to accomplish amazing things.

The days alone in the wet cell had helped confirm the reality that her life had permanently changed. Her dash into the jungle now seemed childish and stupid. There would be no escape. Life as she had known it was over.

Raisha shook with sobs. She should have been more careful! Zerif should have rescued her before she got here. Was there any chance he would come for her now?

No. With her cover blown, she would be of little use to him. The dealings and travels of her father had granted her access that Zerif found useful. Raisha would learn a dignitary's schedule, or leave a door unlocked, or deliver a package, and consequently earn praise and gifts from the future ruler of Erdas. And then there were the Great Beasts! Creatures of legend, taken as easily as if they'd been dogs in the street.

If she could go back, would she do it differently? How could she have resisted the thrill? Her involvement with Zerif had been the secret spice in her life, making everything else mean more. Without that secret, who would she have been? Nobody. Another silly merchant-class girl who pretended to have interests until she was married off to some insipid merchant-class boy. She would never have done anything important, and there would have been no adventure in her life.

Looking around her tomblike cell, Raisha breathed in the damp air. Was this what adventure looked like? Rotting in a half-drowned tomb? The thought of being here a week more was too much. Let alone a year. Or ten. Or thirty.

Raisha felt crushed by the weight of all those years piled on top of her. Hauling water through the jungle. Huddling in a humid cell eating tasteless goo. This wasn't living.

Leaning back on the cot, Raisha laced her fingers behind her head. She wished she could sleep for the next thirty years. It would be better than the uncomfortable monotony that awaited. She would surely lose her mind.

No—after her escape attempt, it might be *more* than thirty years. If the Greencloaks felt she was such a threat, did she have any guarantee they would ever release her?

It was going to be a long, slow, wretched life.

The light from the window shaft dimmed. Had a cloud swiftly overtaken the sun? And was there less torchlight coming in from the corridor? Were the torches burning out? In the dimness, rats started squeaking in the walls. Raisha sat up, the hairs on her neck standing upright. She hated the rats at the Mire. They were too big.

Raisha felt an odd tingling. The entire prison began to tremble, stones groaning. The water on the floor of her cell sloshed. Then came a searing flash and a crash like thunder.

As Raisha blinked away the afterimage of the brilliant light, her eyes fell to a motion on the floor of her cell. The light from the shaft into her

room was back to normal, and she could see a snake flowing toward her in looping curves, long body undulating like a ribbon in a river.

With a scream stuck in her throat, Raisha scooted to the opposite side of her cot from the serpent. The rats had grown quiet, but this was much worse!

The snake reared up, revealing a yellow underside in contrast to the black scales elsewhere. A hood spread out, framing the head. The cobra swayed gently, and a thin tongue flicked out.

As Raisha gazed at the cobra, she began to collect her thoughts. She was still tingling and felt inexplicably drawn to the snake. The temporary dimness, the upheaval of the prison, the squeaking rats, and the flash of light began to add up in her mind. Had she just summoned a spirit animal? Here? Now?

Chills tingled through her as the serpent edged nearer, holding its head above the edge of the cot. Raisha studied the cobra as it swayed hypnotically. Black eyes rimmed in gold returned her gaze.

Raisha slowly reached a hand toward the snake. If the animal struck her, the bite could be fatal. Yet she felt strangely calm, her fingers drawn toward the reptile almost against her will.

The cobra stopped swaying. The stillness made her hesitate inches from contact, then her fingertips brushed the side of its hood, and Raisha gasped at the spark that reverberated through her body. The invigorating jolt was accompanied by a sense of relief, as if she were finally breathing after a long pause.

For a moment, Raisha sensed people throughout the prison in varied states of alarm, mostly in rooms and yards above her present position. Thoughts and conversations about the recent quaking came to her in jumbled snippets. She could taste the odor of her cell.

“You’re Gerathon,” Raisha said in amazement.

The cobra dipped her head in acknowledgment, then bared slender fangs in a reptilian parody of a smile.

“I’m Raisha,” she said breathlessly. Tears blurred her vision. She had always hoped to call a spirit animal, and had also felt a quiet certainty that it wouldn’t happen. Nobody in her family had summoned one for generations. But now, in her hour of need, here was one of the most powerful animals of all time. The mighty Gerathon!

The cobra dipped her head again.

From beyond the door of her cell, Raisha heard voices and the clinking of keys. The sounds snapped her out of her trance.

“You need to hide!” Raisha warned Gerathon. “We’re in a Greencloak prison. The Mire. I don’t know what they’ll do if they find you here.”

The voices drew nearer.

In spite of her fear of discovery, Raisha couldn’t resist grinning. “You used to be bigger, right? That’s not an insult. You’re a full-sized cobra, but you used to be gigantic. You’re still too large to hide in here. But not too big to fit up the shaft to my pathetic window.”

Raisha leaped to her feet, splashing as she dragged the cot beneath the window shaft. Picking up the sleek cobra, Raisha found her heavy and awkward to hold. But she climbed onto the cot and managed to lift the sinuous reptile above her head.

Hood down, Gerathon squirmed through the grate and up into the shaft. Keys rattled in the cell door. Just as the cobra’s tail disappeared through the grate, the door opened.

Payu, a tall, stern-eyed female guard, stepped down into the room, her boots plopping into the water. “What are you doing?”

Raisha kept her eyes away from the shaft. She could feel the guilt on her face, and she knew that standing on her cot looked suspicious. Would the guard notice she was right below the shaft?

“I heard rats in the walls,” Raisha said. “They were going crazy.”

Urban entered the room behind Payu. “So you climbed onto your cot?” he asked.

“I didn’t know if the rats were going to flood into my cell,” Raisha said. “I was freaked out.”

“You moved the cot,” Payu noted.

“Under the light port,” Urban added, sloshing across the room. Leaning over the cot, he peered up the shaft.

Raisha looked up as he did. There was no sign of the cobra.

“I thought maybe the light would scare the rats,” Raisha said.

Stepping back, Urban folded his arms. “This smells fishy.”

“It’s mildew,” Raisha corrected.

“I saw the lights dim, Raisha,” Urban went on. “I know what it looks and sounds like when a spirit animal is summoned. We all do. Only three of the prisoners here are of the proper age to summon a spirit animal, yourself included. Our guards are checking on the other two.”

“You’re a criminal,” Payu said. “But summoning a spirit animal is no crime. We wouldn’t punish a newly called animal for your past mistakes.”

Unless the animal has committed crimes too, Raisha thought. *Like almost destroying Erdas in a former life.* “You think I called a spirit animal?” she asked sweetly.

Urban gave her a searching gaze. “Have it your way. We’ll check up on the other possible candidates. But if you happened to summon a spirit animal, you don’t need to hide it.”

“Would you promise to be as good to my animal as you’ve been to me?” Raisha asked with mock sincerity.

Urban gave an incredulous chuckle. “Are you honestly complaining? You conspired to part people from their spirit animals, and you think prison is harsh? Plenty of people would have wanted you to hang for that crime. Raisha, you still have a chance here. Let us help you.”

“Don’t take her bait,” Payu said.

“She’s a kid,” he replied.

Payu shook her head. “She looks like a child, but no true child would do what she did. That’s why she’s here. Come on. We’ll check back later.”

After Payu exited, Urban lingered in the doorway, staring. Was his look meant to convey sympathy? Did he want her to trust him? Was he out of his mind?

Raisha could hear Payu walking away, but Urban stepped back into the room. “I get that you hate it here. I know you see us as monsters for locking you up. But we’re trying to protect the world from monsters like Zerif. You don’t owe him your loyalty anymore. We both know he was using you.”

Raisha looked away from Urban.

“We also both know you’re no ordinary kid. You’re special, Raisha. What kind of twelve-year-old can get into the kind of trouble you stirred up? And I’d bet my life savings that you called a spirit animal on top of it. Work with us. These walls won’t only keep you in. They can keep Zerif out. We don’t just want to save everyone else from him. We can also help save you.”

Raisha wavered. Did she want to spend the next thirty years alone? Was it possible to form friendships with her Greencloak captors? Maybe even learn from them? No—those thoughts were pathetic. Urban just wanted to win her over so he could get info about Zerif. If he knew she had called Gerathon, he and every other Greencloak in Erdas would only want to control her.

She let her eyes return to his, a sneer curling her lip. “The last thing I need is the help of some joke who lives in a swamp with his mule.”

Urban held her gaze for a long moment. She didn’t see hurt there, and that made her feel a little awkward for being so harsh.

“At least I didn’t steal my spirit animal,” Urban said gently. “Nor would I want to steal yours.” He stepped out and closed the door.

Raisha sat back down on her cot. The panic of danger, the thrill of summoning a beast of legend, and the fear of discovery had combined to leave her drained.

Leaning back, Raisha stared up the empty shaft. Where had Gerathon gone? Would the cobra return soon? Or would she abandon Raisha for a

more comfortable life elsewhere? Could spirit animals do that?

Her thoughts turned to Zerif. He wanted to collect the Great Beasts. Where would his journeys take him next?

She abruptly sat up. Zerif was collecting Great Beasts. He had ways of figuring out where they would show up. Did that mean he would come for Raisha now? Was she important again?

Would he try to steal Gerathon? No, there was no need. Raisha had served him well. She would still serve him. Why separate her from the snake?

But would he see it that way?

Her heart rate sped up. Raisha couldn't be sure of anything. If Zerif did want to take Gerathon from her, was there any way to stop him? Not alone. But with Gerathon at her side, who knew what she might accomplish. It would be Raisha and her spirit animal against the world. Those odds might not be too terrible. After all, Gerathon had almost taken over the world once before.

But to have any chance, Raisha knew she absolutely had to escape.



That night, Raisha awoke with a hand covering her mouth. She reflexively struggled and tried to cry out.

“Not a word,” a voice breathed in her ear. “I’m here to help.”

Raisha forced herself to keep still. By the voice and hand she could tell that the figure looming over her was a man. A Greencloak? It wasn't Urban.

Raisha nodded and the hand slid away from her mouth. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“I’m Dorell,” the voice replied. “I work in the kitchens here. But my loyalties lie elsewhere.”

“Where do they lie?”

He didn't respond immediately. Raisha heard water trickling in the darkness. "Many believe a rumor that you summoned a spirit animal and are keeping it hidden. Is this so?"

"I don't know you," Raisha said.

"I serve one who you also served," Dorell replied. "One who believes you may have called an animal of great significance. If so, it won't be long before the Greencloaks discover this as well."

Raisha was fully aware that this stranger in her cell could be lying. He could be a Greencloak trying to trick the information out of her. He could also be working for Zerif, or he could be working for himself.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Raisha whispered. She gave a little shrug. "I didn't summon anything. Now get out of here before I scream."

"Decide very carefully," the stranger warned. "I'm prepared to extract you tonight. If you trust your captors more than me, so be it."

"You can get me out of here?" Raisha asked.

"The kitchens resupply with boats from the mainland," Dorell said. "I have a small craft standing ready."

Paralyzed by indecision, Raisha weighed her options. Were the Greencloaks more dangerous to her, or was Zerif? Urban was right that the prison walls offered some protection from her former employer. Would the Greencloaks try to separate her from Gerathon? Probably not. But they would most likely hold both of them prisoner for the rest of their lives.

What about Dorell? Was that even his real name? He could be anyone. Did he really work for Zerif? If so, it proved Zerif could get to her, even in the Mire. Dorell's mission *could* be to steal Gerathon. If not, his own agenda might not be any better.

Something plopped down beside Raisha, landing softly on her mattress. A muscular, scaly rope flexed against her arm, and she heard a fierce hiss.

Dorell released Raisha, sloshing through the water as he stepped back. He lit a lamp, revealing that he was a short man with lean features and

large dark eyes. He looked much too scrawny to be lugging food around all day. His eyes widened as they fixed on the snake. "It's true," Dorell whispered. "You summoned *Her*."

Gerathon swiveled to gaze at Raisha, then slithered off the cot, landing on the floor with a splash. The cobra crossed to Dorell and claimed a position near his feet. Dorell kept still. The cobra looked at Raisha and hissed.

It seemed like Gerathon wanted to go. That was good enough for Raisha, who felt no path was clearly better than the others. At least she would get to leave with her spirit animal.

"If Gerathon trusts you, I'm sold," Raisha said.

"Fine," Dorell said. He extinguished the lamp. "Stay close."

Raisha stood up, submerging her feet in lukewarm water. In the dark, Dorell took her hand. He led her to the door and out of the cell.

An unseen lamp around a bend shed a little light in the mossy corridor. Like in her cell, water wept down the walls here, though the floor in the hall had better drainage.

"They did us a favor moving you to solitary," Dorell whispered. "This wing connects to a subcellar beneath the kitchens. Smuggling you out will be no trickier than sneaking a roll from the storeroom."

Dorell released her hand and led the way. Gerathon glided alongside her. As the corridor grew darker, Dorell glanced back, his eyebrows raised.

"After this corner there are no more lanterns, and we'll have to wade a bit," he whispered. "Small price for freedom, am I right?"

"Just go," Raisha said.

It soon became perfectly dark. They picked their way forward carefully through unseen debris, only an occasional drip or gurgle interrupting the silence. After scooting through a low gap in a wall, Raisha descended some steps into deeper water that came to her waist.

Raisha tried not to imagine what else might be lurking in these obscure waters. She did her best to stay beside Dorell.

“Gerathon is welcome to ride me,” Dorell said. A moment later, he let out a nervous squeak. “Ah! Excellent. I ... feel her under my shirt. This will be an honor.”

Stretching out her hand, Raisha felt her cobra coiling around her guide’s shoulders. The submerged ground remained uneven, so she stepped carefully. Below the water, Raisha’s leg brushed against a greasy mass. Biting her lip to contain a shriek, Raisha floundered away from the contact. Dorell helped steady her.

“Are you all right?” he whispered.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Raisha muttered.

Still in blackness, they reached a wall of corroded bars. One had been removed, allowing Dorell and Raisha to slip through, though anybody much bigger would have had trouble.

“It gets deeper here,” Dorell whispered.

Raisha took a step and nearly screamed. Suddenly she found herself immersed up to her neck, treading water. “This is more than wading,” she hissed.

“Not far now,” Dorell promised. “A short swim.”

As she swam in the darkness, Raisha felt a slick shape ripple against her elbow. She shuddered but kept moving. The only way out of this was forward.

Before long they found a flight of stone stairs. Dorell led the way up and through a trapdoor. Lamplight reached them from an adjoining room.

“This is kept locked,” Dorell murmured. “Good thing I’m trusted with the keys to the kitchens.”

“No offense, but you could use some better cooks,” Raisha said, wringing water from her sodden prison rags.

Dorell grinned. “You mean the slop they feed the prisoners? Not much effort wasted there. But the Greencloaks stationed here eat quite well. We should hurry.”

With Gerathon still coiled around his neck and shoulders, Dorell hustled from one room to another until they reached a long corridor

followed by a narrow stairway.

Peering down, Raisha saw that it descended to an iron door.

“Would you believe this will take us beyond the walls?” Dorell wagged his eyebrows conspiratorially.

“Really?” Raisha asked.

“The dock nearby is used to bring food in,” Dorell said. “I already took care of the guard outside. And of course I have the key.”

Raisha asked for no elaboration about the guard. She assumed Dorell had killed him and dumped the body in the swamp.

Dorell opened the door, and suddenly Raisha was following him along a tidy path under a starry sky and slim crescent moon. The walls of the Mire rose behind her. As usual, the night was warm. Not sweltering like in the day, but even with her clothes soaked, Raisha felt no chill.

They reached a little dock where a small skiff was tied up. “Not many boats,” Raisha said.

“I sank three bigger ones,” Dorell explained.

“You were that sure I’d come with you?” Raisha asked.

“My orders were clear,” Dorell said. “Our master would have accepted nothing less. The Greencloaks won’t know you’re gone for hours. When they get wise, they’ll have a hard time following us.”

“I like how you think,” Raisha said.

“I like being alive,” Dorell replied. He held her hand as she boarded the skiff, then untied the craft and hopped in. He snatched up a pole and pushed them away from the dock.

By the scant moonlight, Raisha could see the prison tilting into the bog like some vast leviathan drowning in quicksand. She wondered how many years before the high walls would become part of the foundation.

As she got settled, Raisha noticed a pair of paddles in the bottom of the boat. “Want me to help?” she asked quietly.

“The pole will suffice,” Dorell said. “We only row in emergencies. The route we’ll take should avoid deep places.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the biggest town we can reach by water. Wan Digal.”

“How long will it take?”

Dorell shrugged, taking hold of the snake. “We should arrive before sunrise.” With the pole in one hand, he tried to lift Gerathon off his shoulders, but the cobra wrapped tighter.

“I don’t think she wants to get down,” Raisha said with mock sweetness.

A flicker of fear passed through the man’s eyes. “Wants to keep me in easy striking distance, does she?” Dorell asked. “Go ahead and kill me. See how far you two get in the swamp alone at night. No? Then get down.”

The cobra loosed her hold of him and dropped to the bottom of the skiff. She glided over to Raisha and curled up in her lap like a coil of rope. Raisha stroked the sleek scales with two fingers.

“What happens in Wan Digal?” Raisha asked.

“We take steps to get you to Xin Kao Dai. Our master will be excited to greet you.”

Raisha watched him pole them along. Dorell obviously knew the swamp well and handled the skiff with competence. She assumed that part of his job entailed making supply runs.

Would he have allies waiting in Wan Digal? How much should she trust him? Gerathon hadn’t wanted to give up the position where she could strike him. That suggested the cobra didn’t put much faith in him. Raisha wondered if Gerathon could still use her venom to control people, like the stories of the Great Serpent had said.

As shadowy trees and muddy islands drifted by, Raisha listened for the sounds of pursuit. How long before the Greencloaks realized she was missing? Surely they had other boats besides the ones Dorell had sabotaged. Some had spirit animals that could fly. Were they already coming for her?

How would Urban feel when he found her missing? She could picture him staring into her empty cell. The imagined bafflement gave her

satisfaction, but it was surprisingly tinged with sadness. Could he have really seen something special in her? Did he sincerely want to help and protect her? Was she trading a safe haven for greater dangers?

Shaking her head, she scolded herself. *Right. Who would dare come after me with a mule standing guard?*

Freedom beat incarceration any day.

The moon blinked in and out of view between overhanging branches. Watching the sky, Raisha remembered her attempted escape just three days ago. It hadn't taken her very long to turn that around. She smiled and closed her eyes. Whatever happened now, at least she was free.

With nothing better to do, Raisha dozed. When she awoke, the moon was out of the sky, and the horizon was turning gray in one direction, making the stars fade.

"We're close to Wan Digal," Dorell said. "Clean getaway."

Raisha looked around. "You're sure the Greencloaks aren't after us?"

"If so, they're well behind us," Dorell said.

Raisha frowned. How could he be so confident without help? "You have a spirit animal," she said finally.

"Maybe," Dorell said with a grin. He gave no details, and Raisha didn't ask.

The predawn light increased. Before long, docks came into view up ahead. This deep in the jungle, Raisha had expected a fairly primitive village, but Wan Digal looked like an actual town. Smaller rowboats, canoes, rafts, and skiffs were attached to lesser quays, but several larger vessels were moored to bigger docks. Despite the early hour, there was already activity on the docks and some vessels out on the water.

When the skiff bumped against the quay, Gerathon attacked.

Dorell was ready. He leaped away just as the serpent lunged silently forward, kicking at the cobra. Gerathon struck his boot twice, then Raisha heard a shriek as a speckled brown and white bird—a marsh harrier—dove at the boat, talons outstretched.

Raisha grabbed a paddle from the bottom of the skiff. While Dorell stomped at Gerathon, she swung the paddle like a battle ax, whacking him on the back of the head. Dorell stumbled to his knees, and Gerathon sprang at him, striking madly.

The harrier stayed close, defending Dorell. Raisha took a swing at the bird of prey. She missed the harrier but struck Dorell on the ear. Gerathon got hold of the harrier with her jaws and promptly wrapped the bird in her coils. The harrier fell to the skiff's bottom like a stone. Feathers ruffled, it lurched and struggled against the serpent. Gerathon struck the bird once, twice, three times, her fangs dripping.

Then, slowly, the bird went limp.

Slumped on his back, Dorell stared at his fallen spirit animal, his breathing shallow, his face haggard. "Why?" he asked.

"I trust the cobra," Raisha said.

Dorell gave a sad smile. "You won't get far. Zerif ... won't be pleased."

Gerathon hissed, and Raisha realized the snake was already on the quay. Raisha jumped out of the skiff without a look back and picked up the cobra, looping the snake over her shoulders. She walked toward the shore but immediately noticed a few fishermen moving toward her, waving their arms.

Raisha ran.

The fishermen ran too, boots clomping against the planks of the dock.

She made it to the buildings by the docks but wasn't far ahead of the oncoming fishermen. Raisha darted down an alley between two of the buildings. What if she got cornered? How many people could Gerathon take out?

"What do I do?" Raisha asked.

The cobra gave no answer.

Raisha ran hard. She wouldn't get caught now. They were almost free!

At the end of the alley, the world suddenly went dark.

Raisha screamed as an unseen assailant yanked a large canvas bag over her head and shoulders. It covered her down past her waist. Gerathon thrashed and hissed, trapped in the bag with her. Raisha struggled too, but strong arms held the bag in place, and a sharp chemical smell was making her woozy.

She couldn't pass out! She had to fight it! She had to get away! But her head was spinning, and it was becoming hard to move. Within moments she slipped into unconsciousness.



The dull ache in her head was her first sensation as Raisha awoke.

She tried to raise a hand to rub her skull but realized her arms were bound at her sides.

The discovery jerked her awake. She was in a small, dim room, strapped to a bed with a thin mattress. Raisha heaved and pulled, but her bindings held firm.

“There you are,” spoke a rich, familiar voice from her past. “Don’t waste energy struggling. Relax. Let’s talk.”

The voice filled her with a sickly mixture of excitement and dread.

Turning her head, Raisha locked eyes with Zerif, taking in his dark tunic and his neatly sculpted facial hair. He had caught her, but he apparently wanted words with her. Did that mean they might still be able to work together?

“You came,” she said, hoping to sound like a lost little girl full of relief.

“I did,” Zerif said with a bland smile. “You’re happy to see me?”

“I thought you’d forgotten about me,” Raisha replied.

“You can drop the act. You and Gerathon killed Dorell and his spirit animal.”

“I’d never seen him before.” Raisha maintained all the innocence she could muster. “I didn’t know if he was being honest. When Gerathon

attacked, I trusted her instincts.”

“Her instincts weren’t wrong,” Zerif said. “Though Dorell did work for me.”

“*I* work for you,” Raisha blurted. “It can be like before. Wasn’t I loyal? Gerathon and I will serve you well.”

“Thank you for your past service,” Zerif said, eyes glittering. “I appreciate the offer. You will indeed serve me. But wherever possible, I prefer a sure bet. This will leave no room for error.” He held out a gloved hand. A small gray worm twisted on his palm.

“No, Zerif,” Raisha pleaded, the words catching in her throat. She flinched away from the worm as much as the restraints would allow.

“Relax,” Zerif said calmly. “Soon you’ll have no cares at all.”

“No!” Raisha shrieked. “This isn’t right! I *called* her. Gerathon! *Gerathon, where are you?*”

Zerif nodded. “I knew you had the potential to summon a Great Beast.” He brought a finger gently to his forehead, where a spiral looped beneath the skin. “Just as I knew where the others would awaken. That potential was part of why I worked with you. Inconvenient that it happened while you were imprisoned, but once again you proved *very* useful in smuggling yourself out. You helped others experience this fate, Raisha. Now it’s your turn.”

Crying hysterically, Raisha lunged against her restraints. She had dreamed of calling a spirit animal her whole life. It had happened more spectacularly than she could have guessed—summoning one of the Great Beasts. And yet she’d had less than a day with her new companion.

“Settle down,” Zerif scolded, his hand coming toward her.

Raisha screamed frantically. What could she say to get out of this? What could she do? There was no time to think!

Zerif placed his palm on her forehead. “In a few moments your concerns will be forgotten. You will know the peace of a wholehearted purpose.”

The worm wriggled just above her eyes. Tears streaming, Raisha whipped her head around, trying to shake it off. She strained against her bindings in vain. The worm broke through her skin and started burrowing. Worse than the physical pain was the horror of knowing what was to come.

She heard hissing from a corner of the room. Craning her neck, she could barely see where a basket was shaking. Gerathon was trying to get free!

“I’m sorry!” Raisha called to the cobra.

“Don’t be,” Zerif said. “I’ll use her much more effectively than you would have. You’ll both still serve the same master.”

Raisha sobbed. How had she ended up in this nightmare? Was this what she had been doing to people? Faces flashed through her mind.

The hopeful, seafaring Cordalles and goofy Dawson Trunswick.

Spritely Grif and the stern Anuqi.

Kids—just like her—whose destinies were taken from them.

Zerif had known she would summon a Great Beast. He had never respected her. She was just another fool in one of his traps. Except more pathetic than anyone else, because she had stood by his side the entire time. She had aided the man who was taking her spirit animal and stealing her identity.

It was too late to be sorry, but that didn’t stop her. Raisha wailed in despair.

And then the emotion was gone.

No longer aware of the tears on her cheeks, arcane whispers caressed the remnants of her mind. Sensing a comforting presence, she turned her head and her eyes found Zerif, her heart swelling with primal devotion. As the unearthly whispers intensified, her vision faded to blackness.

Brandon Mull is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Fablehaven*, *Beyonders*, and *Five Kingdoms* series. He kicked off the Spirit Animals series with Book One: *Wild Born*, and contributed a short story in the Spirit Animals special edition: *Tales of the Great Beasts*. As a kid, he had a dog, a cat, a horse, some goldfish (won at a school carnival), and briefly a tarantula (captured in his neighborhood). He now lives in Utah with his wife, four kids, and the family dog. He thinks his spirit animal would be a dolphin.

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Book Three

The Return

By Varian Johnson



ZERIF JAMMED HIS FINGERS INTO A SMALL CREVICE AND climbed onto the narrow, rocky ledge. Ahead, the majestic peaks of the Kenjoba Mountains stretched before him. Below, he could still hear the shouts of the Niloan warriors and Greencloaks in pursuit. They had been chasing him for days. He thought that he would be able to hide in one of the villages in South Nilo, but it had only taken a few days for someone to turn on him and alert the authorities. He bolted as soon as he saw the first Greencloak roaming the small village.

Now that the war was over, Zerif found that very few of his allies remained. Most of the Conquerors had surrendered as soon as they lost control over their spirit animals, thanks to the destruction of the Evertree canceling the effects of Gerathon's Bile. The few warriors that still pledged allegiance to the Reptile King wanted nothing to do with Zerif—and would have probably turned him over to the Greencloaks themselves if they found him.

Not even Zerif's jackal remained. Like the other animals, it had abandoned him as soon as he lost his power to control it.

He was glad that he hadn't bothered to name it.

No matter, he thought. I am Zerif. I will triumph again. As always.

Zerif climbed to another ledge, scraping his hands and face as he pulled himself up. His blue tunic, ripped and withered, flapped against

him in the howling winds. The breeze shifted direction, and suddenly the stench of rot filled Zerif's nostrils. He looked around. To his right, on another ledge, large black buzzards picked at the remains of an animal. Zerif backed up to gain as much running ground as possible. Then he took off, his weakened legs flailing as he leaped through the air. He landed on the ledge and stumbled, almost falling over into the deep, empty valley below. Once he was sure of his footing, he charged toward the birds, driving them away.

Zerif peered at the rotting carcass. There wasn't much left of the wild dog—a few slivers of flesh hung on the otherwise dry bones, and the beast's fur was torn and ripped. Still, he picked up what remained of the animal and flung it over his shoulder. One of the Greencloaks had been traveling with a fox; he hoped the dead animal would help mask his own scent.

After a few more hours of climbing, Zerif stumbled upon a long fissure in the rock face. It took some effort, but he crawled through. Sparse patches of green moss covered the slick, cool walls of the small cavern. The cave was barely big enough for him to sit up in, much less stand. He was shivering so much that his teeth rattled and his fingers were blue, but he didn't dare light a fire.

Anger seethed from him. This was not what was supposed to happen when he allied himself with the Conquerors. They had failed him.

Zerif dropped the carcass beside him and curled himself into a tight ball. He would wait and plan. Eventually, the Greencloaks would abandon their pursuit.

And then, very soon, he would be great and powerful once again.



Two days later, he still hadn't crawled out of the cave.

Every time he considered leaving, he thought he heard the footsteps of Greencloaks or the shouts of Niloan warriors. Perhaps it was just the

wind. Or the sound of rocks tumbling down the mountain. Maybe he was hallucinating. He had tried to eat moss to gain strength but had retched the bitter vegetation back up as soon as it hit his stomach.

It was there, lying with his face pressed against the ground, that he first saw the gray worm inching toward him.

It was small and strange-looking. And fluid—almost like a coil of smoke. It moved toward him with an eerie purpose, as if it knew he was there. Zerif had never seen anything like it.

What is this? A leech? A snail?

And is it edible?

Zerif shook his head as he considered what to do. *Has the mighty Zerif fallen so low that the idea of eating a worm excites him?*

He picked up the worm, hoping to study it. It wriggled up his hand much quicker than he had anticipated. Before he knew it, it was at his elbow. He shook his arm furiously, but the worm remained. It burrowed its way into a deep gash on Zerif's shoulder. Panicked, he hurled himself into the wall, hoping to crush the thing. When that didn't work, he picked up a jagged rock and tried to cut the worm out of his skin.

Nothing seemed to stop the creature. It inched its way beneath his skin, up to his collarbone, then neck, then face. Zerif could feel it writhing. He screamed—both in fear and in pain. He felt it curling at his forehead.

Zerif twisted, clawing at his face, driving deep gouges into his skin.

And then, Zerif fell silent. His legs and arms ceased to move. They no longer belonged to him.

Slowly, he heard ancient whispers echoing in his mind. Soft at first, they intensified, feeding the anger and evil already residing in the depths of his soul.

Power surged inside him. He rose to his feet, no longer hungry or pained. He sensed the voice telling him to leave. To travel north. A being of great power would be there. An eagle.

Halawir.

Suddenly, Zerif found himself surrounded by hundreds of small gray worms. They crept from rocks, seeping out like liquid darkness. Parasites. Allies.

With their help, Zerif would be great once again.

He would be feared and worshipped.

He would rule the world.



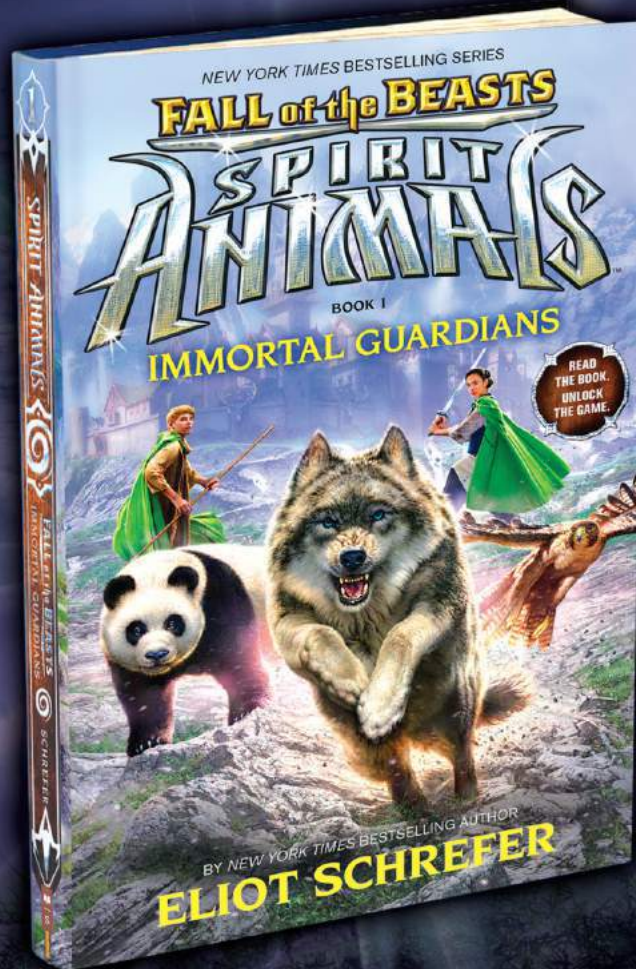
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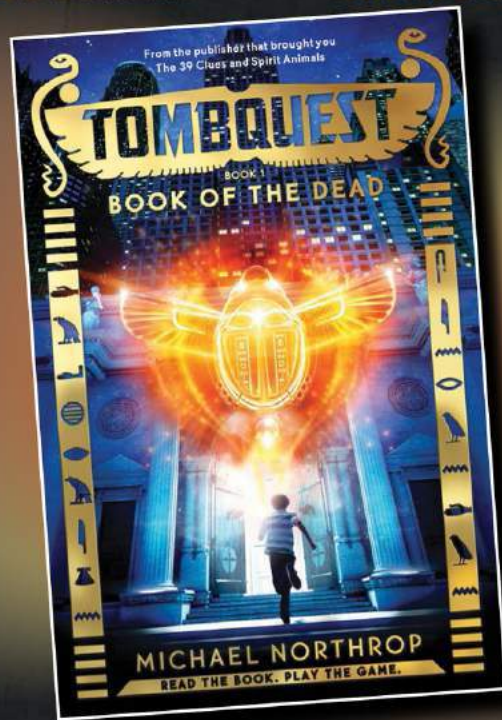
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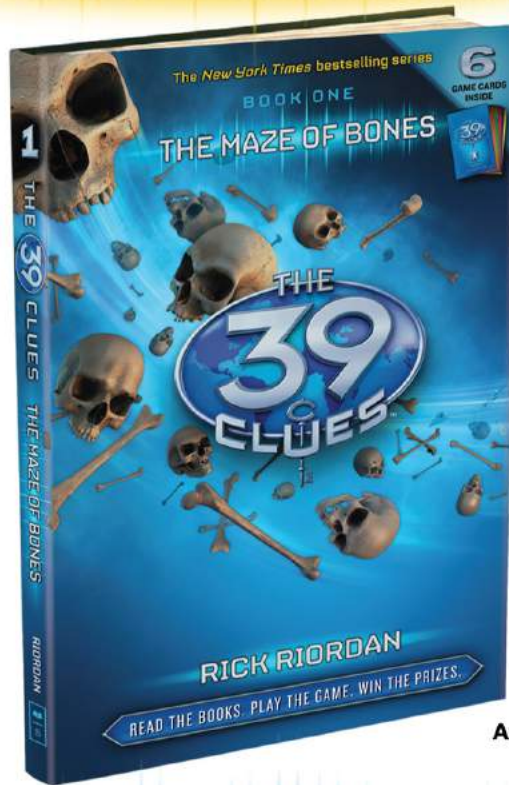
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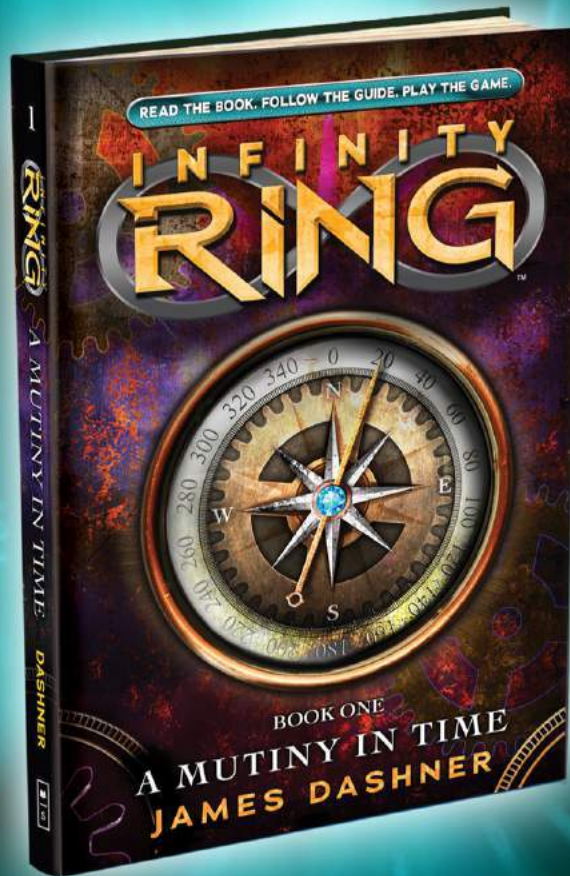
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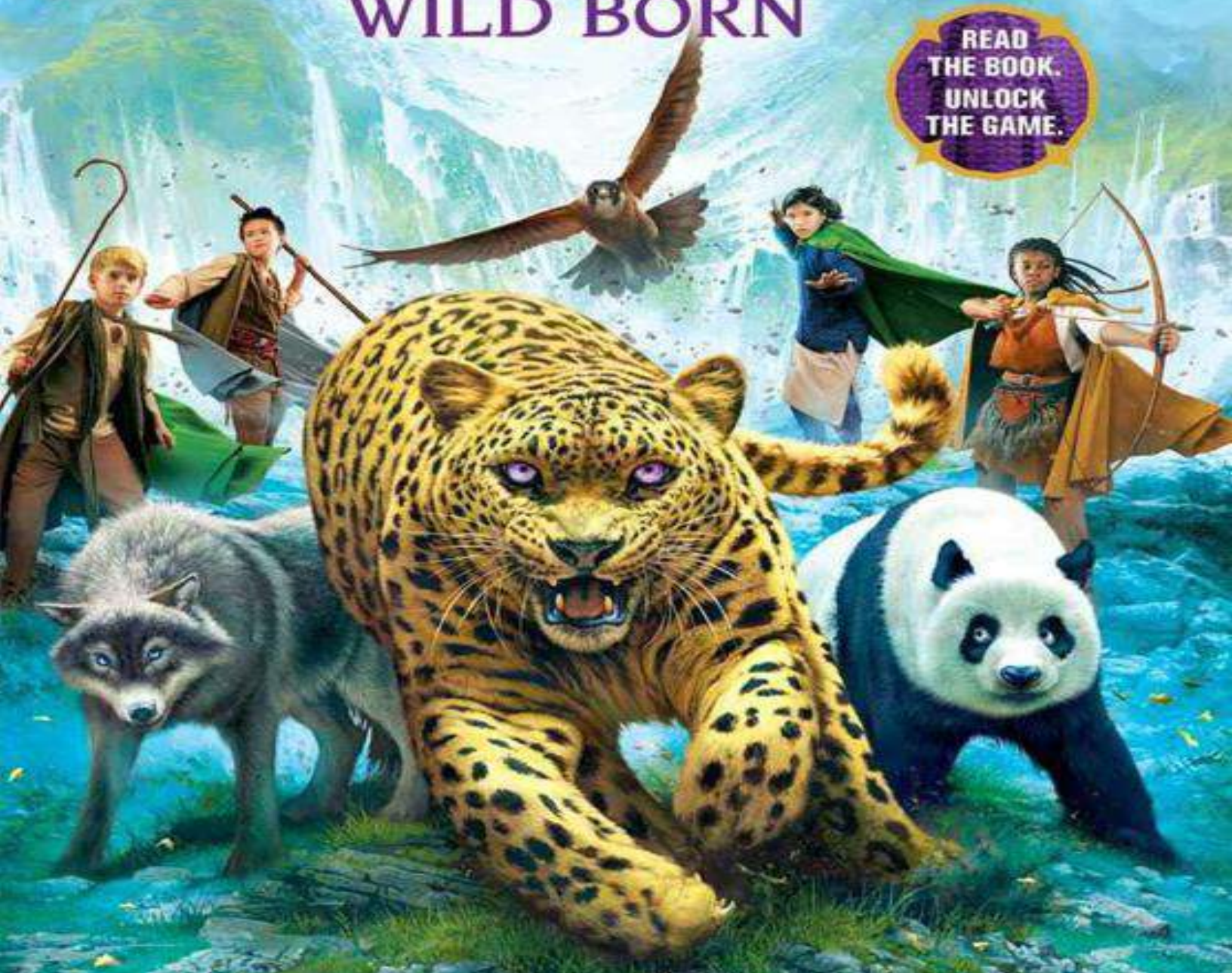
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flash pierced the
gloom like lightning.

And then he saw
the wolf.



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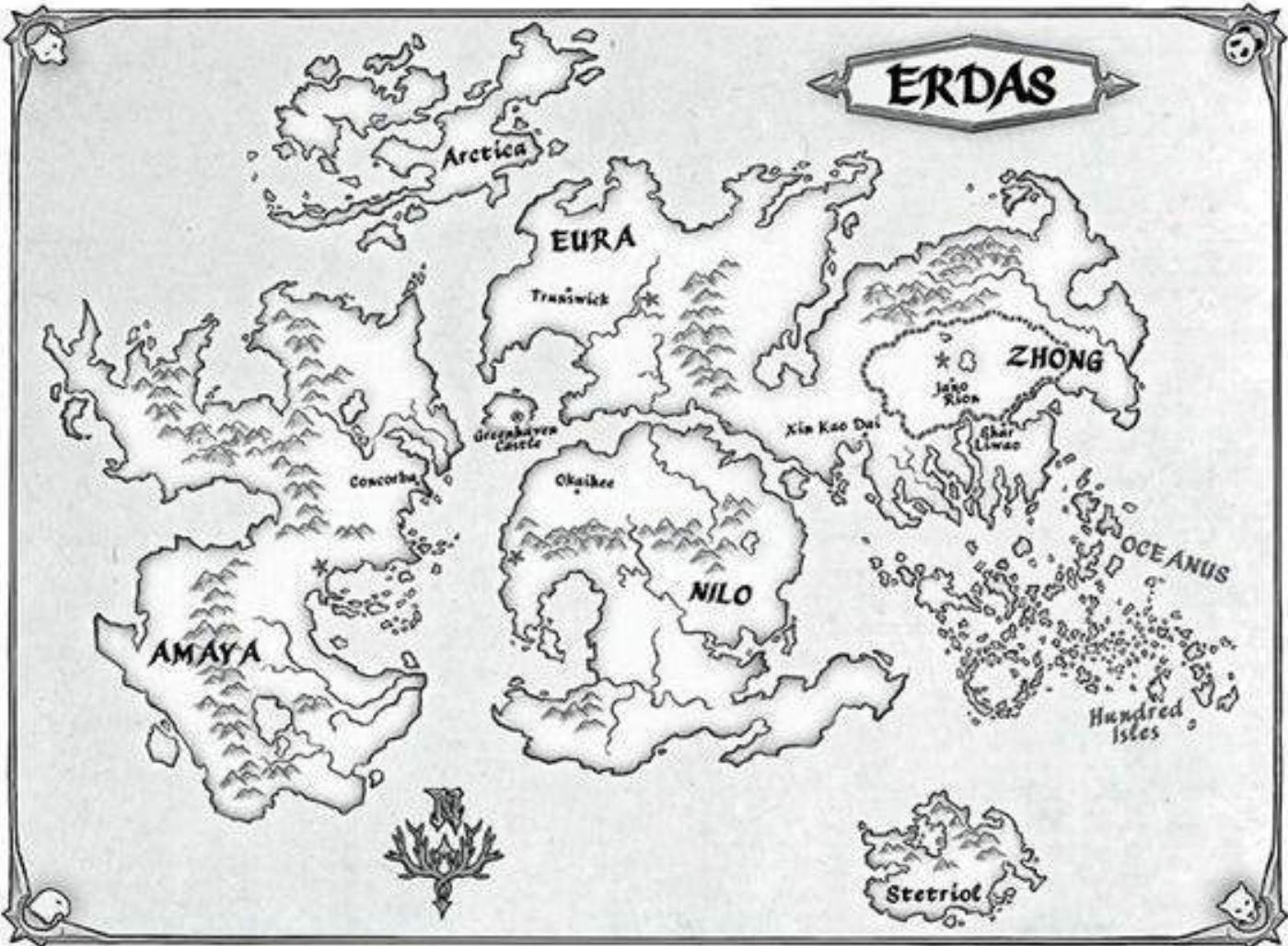
WILD BORN

Brandon Mull



SCHOLASTIC INC.

ERDAS



*For Sadie, who loves animals.
And for Fluffy, Buffy, and Mango, who are animals.
— B.M.*



Leopard Emblem

Greencloak Letter

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GIVEN A CHOICE, CONOR WOULD NOT HAVE PICKED TO SPEND the most important birthday of his life helping Devin Trunswick get dressed. In all honesty, he would not have volunteered to help Devin Trunswick do anything, ever.

But Devin was the eldest son of Eric, the Earl of Trunswick, and Conor was the third son of Fenray, Herder of Sheep. Fenray had incurred debts to the earl, and Conor was helping to work them off as a servant to Devin. The arrangement had begun over a year ago, and was set to last at least two more.

Conor had to hook each fiddly clasp on the back of Devin's coat correctly or the folds would hang crooked, and he would hear about it for weeks. The fine material was more decorative than practical. If caught in a storm, Conor knew that Devin would wish for a simpler, more durable coat. One without clasps. One that might actually keep him warm.

"Are you done fussing around back there?" Devin asked in exasperation.

"Sorry for the delay, milord," Conor replied. "There are forty-eight clasps. I'm just now linking the fortieth."

"How many more days will this take? I'm about to die of old age! Are you just inventing numbers?"

Conor resisted a sharp reply. Having grown up counting sheep, he probably knew his numbers better than Devin. But arguing with a noble caused more trouble than it was worth. Sometimes Devin seemed to deliberately tempt him. "It's my best guess."

The door flew open and Dawson, Devin's younger brother, burst into the room. "Are you *still* getting dressed, Devin?"

"Don't blame me," Devin protested. "Conor keeps napping."

Conor only gave Dawson a brief glance. The sooner he finished the clasps, the sooner he could get himself ready.

"How could Conor fall asleep?" Dawson called, giggling. "Everything you say, brother, is so *interesting*."

Conor resisted a grin. Dawson seldom stopped talking. He often got annoying, but he could sometimes be pretty funny. "I'm awake."

"Aren't you done yet?" Devin complained. "How many are left?"

Conor wanted to say twenty. "Five."

"Think you'll summon a spirit animal, Devin?" Dawson asked.

"I don't see why not," Devin replied. "Grandfather called a mongoose. Father produced a lynx."

Today was the Trunswick Nectar Ceremony. In less than an hour, the local children who turned eleven this month would each try to call a spirit animal. Conor knew that some families tended to form bestial bonds more regularly than others. Even so, calling a spirit animal was never guaranteed, no matter what your family name. There were only three kids scheduled to drink the Nectar, and the odds were against any of them succeeding. It was certainly nothing to boast about before it happened.

"What animal do you think you'll get?" Dawson wondered.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Devin said. "What do you expect?"

"A chipmunk," Dawson predicted.

Devin lunged at his brother, who scampered away, giggling. Dawson was not dressed as formally as his older brother, which allowed him freer movement. Still, Devin soon caught him and tackled him to the floor, pinning him down.

"A bear would be more likely," Devin said, grinding his elbow into his brother's chest. "Or a wildcat, like Father. First thing I'll do is have it taste you."

Conor tried to wait patiently. It wasn't his place to intervene.

"You might get nothing," Dawson said bravely.

"Then all I'll be is Earl of Trunswick, and your master."

"Not if Father outlives you."

"I'd mind my tongue, second son."

"I'm glad I'm not you!"

Devin twisted Dawson's nose until he yelped, then stood up, brushing off his trousers. "At least my nose isn't sore."

"Conor will drink the Nectar too!" Dawson cried. "Maybe he'll be the one to call a spirit animal."

Conor tried to look invisible. Did he hope to summon a spirit animal? Of course! Who wouldn't? You couldn't help hoping. Just because nobody in his family had done it since some obscure great-granduncle decades ago didn't make it impossible.

"Right." Devin chuckled. "And I suppose the smith's daughter will summon one as well."

"You never know," Dawson said, sitting up and rubbing his nose. "Conor, what would you like to have?"

Conor stared at the floor. He had been asked a direct question by a noble, so he had to answer. "I've always gotten on well with dogs. I'd like a sheepdog, I guess."

"What an imagination!" Devin laughed. "The shepherd dreams of calling a sheepdog."

"A dog would be fun," Dawson said.

"And common," Devin said. "How many dogs do you have, Conor?"

"My family? Ten, last I counted."

"How long since you've seen your family?" Dawson asked.

Conor tried to keep his voice even. "More than half a year."

"They'll be there today?"

“I expect they’ll try. It depends on whether they can get away.” In case they couldn’t make it, he didn’t want to show that he cared.

“How novel for you,” Devin sniffed. “How many clasps remain?”

“Three.”

Devin turned around. “Let’s not dawdle. We’re running late.”



An impressive assemblage had gathered in the square. It was not every day that the son of a great lord quested for his spirit animal. Commoners and nobles alike had come for the event — old, young, and in between. Musicians played, soldiers strutted, and a peddler sold candied nuts. A grandstand had been erected for the earl and his family. Conor thought it looked as if a holiday had been declared. A holiday for everyone but him. The day was cool and clear. The green hills where Conor would rather be roaming loomed far beyond the blue rooftops and chimneys of Trunswick.

Conor had attended a few Nectar ceremonies. He had never witnessed the calling of a spirit animal, although he knew it had happened several times in this square during his lifetime. There had been little pageantry at the ceremonies he had seen. None had been well attended. And none had involved so many animals.

A common belief held that bringing together a variety of animals increased the chance of summoning a spirit animal. If so, Devin might be in luck. Not only were many domestic animals present, but Conor saw mews full of birds with exotic plumage, a corral containing deer and moose, several caged wildcats, a penned trio of badgers, and a black bear chained to a post by an iron collar. There was even a beast that Conor had only heard about in stories — a huge camel with two furry humps.

As Conor walked toward the center of the square, the hordes of onlookers made him self-conscious. He wasn’t sure what to do with his hands. Should he fold his arms or let them dangle at his sides? As he scanned the intimidating crowd, he tried to remember that most eyes were fixed on Devin.

Suddenly Conor noticed his mother waving. His elder brothers stood beside her, and his father. They had even brought Soldier, Conor’s favorite sheepdog.

They had all made it! The sight of them thawed some of his fear and awoke a longing for home — meadows to wander, creeks to swim in, groves to explore. His work had been honest and outdoors — chopping wood, shearing sheep, feeding dogs. Their home had been small but cozy, and nothing like the drafty immensity of the earl’s castle. Conor gave his mother a little wave.

The future Earl of Trunswick led the way to a bench near the center of the square. Abby, the smith’s daughter, awaited them, sitting still and looking overwhelmed. She was clearly dressed in her best clothes, which were laughably inferior to even the most casual dress owned by Devin’s mother or sister. Conor knew he must also look very plain beside Devin.

A pair of Greencloaks stood before the bench. Conor recognized the woman, Isilla, her graying hair gathered up in a glittering net over her pale face. Her goldfinch, Frida, was perched on her shoulder. Isilla normally officiated at the Nectar ceremonies. She had given the Nectar to both of his brothers.

The other Greencloak was a stranger, tall and lean, with wide shoulders and features as weathered as his cloak. His skin was darker than the people around him, as if he came from northeastern Nilo or

southwestern Zhong — an unusual sight in the middle of Eura. His animal was not evident, but Conor noticed a hint of a tattoo winding away into his sleeve. The sight gave him a thrill. It meant the stranger's spirit animal was currently hibernating on his arm.

Abby rose and curtsied as Devin approached the bench. He sat down and motioned for Conor to follow his lead. Conor and Abby sat.

Isilla raised her hands to still the crowd. The stranger backed away, leaving her the center of attention. Conor wondered why the man had come. As with the rest of the pageantry, Conor decided it must be another nod to Devin's high status.

Isilla began in a penetrating voice, "Hear ye, hear ye, good people of Trunswick! Before the eyes of man and beast, we are gathered here today to participate in the most sacred rite in all of Erdas. When human and animal unite, their greatness is multiplied. We have come to witness whether the Nectar will reveal such greatness in any of these three candidates — Lord Devin Trunswick; Abby, daughter of Grall; and Conor, son of Fenray."

The cheering after the mention of Devin all but drowned out the other two names. Conor tried to remain impassive. If he sat still and kept calm, soon it would be over. Devin would drink the Nectar first, in the place of honor. Common belief held that the first to drink the Nectar in a ceremony was the most likely to call a spirit animal.

Isilla bent over to raise a plugged flask, the leather tooled with intricate designs. After raising the flask above her head to display it to the assemblage, she unstopped it. "Devin Trunswick, come forward."

The crowd whistled and clapped as Devin approached Isilla, then quieted down as she put her finger to her lips. Devin knelt before her, a sight Conor had seldom seen. Euran nobles only knelt to greater Euran nobles. The Greencloaks knelt to none.

"Receive the Nectar of Ninani."

Conor could not help but feel excited as the flask tipped toward Devin's lips. This might be the first time he witnessed a spirit animal summoned from the unknown! With all of these animals present, how could the Nectar fail? Conor wondered what the beast would look like.

Devin swallowed. Isilla stepped back. A deep hush fell over the square. Eyes closed, Devin tilted his face skyward. An empty moment passed. Somebody coughed. Nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Perplexed, Devin looked around.

Conor had heard that a spirit animal either came right after the Nectar was tasted, or never. Devin arose and turned in a full circle, eyes roving. There was no sign of anything appearing nearby. The crowd began to murmur.

Isilla hesitated, considering the grandstand. Conor followed her gaze. The earl sat grimly on his throne, his lynx nearby. Although he had summoned a spirit animal, he had chosen not to wear the green cloak.

Isilla glanced back at the foreign Greencloak, who gave a faint nod. "Thank you, Devin," she intoned. "Abby, daughter of Grall, come forward."

Devin looked queasy. His eyes were blank, but his posture betrayed his humiliation. He glanced furtively toward his father, then looked down. When he lifted his eyes again, his gaze had hardened, the shame turning to fury. Conor looked away. It would be best to avoid Devin's attention for a while.

Abby drank and, as Conor expected, nothing happened. She returned to the bench.

"Conor, son of Fenray, come forward."

Hearing his name called gave Conor a nervous thrill. If Devin had failed to call an animal, Conor doubted he had any chance. Still, anything could happen. Never had so many eyes been trained just on him. Rising to his feet, Conor tried to ignore the crowd by focusing on Isilla. The tactic didn't really work.

If nothing else, it would be interesting to discover what the Nectar tasted like. His oldest brother had compared it to sour goat's milk, but Wallace liked to tease. His other brother, Garrin, had likened it to apple cider. Conor licked his lips. Whatever the taste, sampling the Nectar would officially mark the end of his childhood.

Conor knelt before Isilla. She looked down at him with a strange smile, curiosity lurking behind her eyes. Had she stared at the others this way?

"Receive the Nectar of Ninani."

Conor put his lips to the offered flask. The Nectar was thick, like syrup, and richly sweet, like fruit in honey. The consistency became more liquid once it was in his mouth. He swallowed. It tasted amazing! Better than anything he had ever tried.

Isilla withdrew the flask before he could steal another sip. One swallow was all he would ever sample. Conor stood in order to return to the bench and a burning, tingling sensation spread through his chest.

Animals began to cry out. The birds shrilled. The wildcats yowled. The bear roared. The moose trumpeted. The camel snorted and stomped.

The ground began to tremble. The sky darkened, as if a swift cloud had overtaken the sun. A brilliant flash pierced the gloom like lightning, but much nearer than any lightning Conor had experienced, nearer even than the time he saw a tree struck at the crest of a hill he was climbing.

Onlookers gasped and murmured. Dazzled by the flash, Conor blinked repeatedly to restore his vision. Hot tingles spread from his chest along his limbs. Despite the oddness of the moment, he felt irrationally joyful.

And then he saw the wolf.

Much like any shepherd in the region, Conor had experience with wolves. Wolf packs had stolen many sheep under his care. Wolves had killed three of his favorite dogs over the years. Livestock lost to wolves was a big part of the reason his father had become indebted to the earl. And of course there was that night two years ago, when Conor and his brothers had stood against a brazen pack that had tried to steal sheep out of their pen in the high pasture.

Now the largest wolf he had ever seen stood before him, head held high. It was a remarkable creature — long-limbed, well fed, with the most luxurious coat of gray-white fur Conor could have imagined. He took in large paws, keen claws, savage teeth, and striking cobalt-blue eyes.

Blue eyes?

In the history of Erdas, only one wolf had such deep blue eyes.

Conor glanced at the Euran flag hanging from the earl's grandstand. Briggan the Wolf, patron beast of Eura, stood depicted upon a rich blue banner, eyes shrewd and piercing.

The wolf padded forward calmly, stopping directly before Conor. It sat, like a trained dog yielding to its master. Its head came well above Conor's waist. Muscles tense, Conor resisted the impulse to leap away. Under other circumstances, he would have run from this animal, or yelled at it. He would have thrown rocks or grabbed a stout staff to defend himself. But this was no chance encounter out in

the wild. His whole body was tingling, almost vibrating, and hundreds of people were watching. This wolf had appeared out of nowhere!

The wolf stared up at him with confidence. Though large and fierce, the animal seemed very much in control of itself. Conor was awed that a predator such as this would show him so much respect. Those blue eyes hinted at a greater understanding than any animal should possess. The wolf was waiting for something.

Conor held out a trembling hand and the wolf's warm pink tongue caressed his palm. The touch was electric, and the tingling in Conor's chest immediately ceased.

For an instant, Conor felt courage, and clarity, and an alertness like he had never known. He smelled the wolf with enhanced senses, and somehow knew it was male, and that it considered him an equal.

Then the strange moment of expanded perception passed.

In spite of the abundant evidence, it was the look on Devin Trunswick's face that brought home to Conor what had transpired. Never had Conor been the focus of such naked rage and envy. He had summoned a spirit animal!

And not just any spirit animal. A wolf. Nobody summoned wolves! Briggan the Wolf had been one of the Great Beasts, and spirit animals were never the same species as the Great Beasts. Everyone knew that. It simply didn't happen.

Yet it had. Undeniably, inexplicably, it had. A full-grown wolf was nuzzling Conor's palm. A wolf with deep blue eyes.

The bewildered crowd kept silent. The earl leaned forward attentively. Devin seethed, and Dawson's mouth was spread in an astonished grin.

The stranger in the green cloak approached and took Conor's hand. "I am Tarik," the man said in a low voice. "I came a long way to find you. Stay near me, and I will let no harm befall you. I won't press you to take our vows until you're ready, but you need to hear me out. Much depends on you."

Conor nodded numbly. It was all too much to digest.

The foreign Greencloak raised Conor's hand high and spoke in a powerful voice. "Good people of Trunswick! News of this day will echo across all of Erdas! In our hour of need, Briggan has returned!"



URAZA

STAYING LOW, ABEKE STALKED THROUGH THE TALL GRASS, moving at a slow, steady pace. She stepped carefully, as her father had taught her, advancing in silence. Sudden motion or sounds would send her prey running. If this one got away, she wouldn't have time to approach another. The antelope lowered its head to nibble at the grass. It was young, but she knew that it could easily outrun her. If it bounded away, she would return empty-handed.

Coming to a standstill, Abeke eased an arrow to the string of her bow. As she pulled it back, the bow creaked. The antelope abruptly looked up. The arrow flew true, skewering the beast's heart and lungs from the side. The antelope staggered only briefly before collapsing.

This antelope would matter to Abeke's village. The drought had made food scarce, and since it showed no sign of relenting, every morsel counted. Abeke knelt beside the fallen animal and spoke in a soft voice. "I'm sorry for taking your life, friend. Our village needs your meat. I got in close and made a clean shot so you wouldn't suffer. Please forgive me."

Abeke glanced at the bright sky. The sun had moved more than she had realized. How long had she stalked her prey? Fortunately, she had found game that was small enough to carry. Abeke slung the antelope over her shoulders and started home.

The sun glared down at the baked, brown plain. The brush was dry and brittle, the shrubs withered and thirsty. A few lonely baobab trees stood in the distance, trunks thick, branches sprawling, blurred by shimmering ripples of heat.

Abeke kept her eyes and ears open. People were not the prey of choice for big cats, but that became less certain when food grew scarce. And big cats were not the only dangerous animals roaming the Niloan savannah. Anyone who ventured beyond the village palisade took a risk.

The farther Abeke walked, the heavier the antelope seemed. But she was tall for her age, and had always been strong, and she was excited to show her prize to her father. She tried to ignore the hot sun.

In her village, the men normally did the hunting. Women rarely ventured out alone. What a surprise this antelope would be! What a perfect way to commemorate her eleventh nameday.

Her sister, Soama, might be more beautiful. She might sing and dance better. She might weave better. She might even be a more gifted artisan.

But she had never made a kill.

Just over a year ago, Soama had presented the village with a beaded tapestry on her eleventh nameday, depicting herons in flight over a pond. Many had remarked that it was the most impressive work they had seen from a young artist. But could they eat it in a famine? Would the beaded pond cure their thirst? Would the fake herons ease the pains of their hunger?

Abeke could not resist a smile. To her knowledge, no child had ever brought game as a nameday gift. Did the village need another decorative jar? To hold what water? Her gift would serve a purpose.

To avoid being spotted by the lookouts, Abeke approached her village stealthily. She entered how she had exited — through the damaged slats in the side of the wall facing the ravine. There was some tricky climbing involved, made no easier by the carcass on her shoulders, but Abeke succeeded.

Time was short. Ignoring the stares of her neighbors, Abeke hurried to her home. Like most of the other dwellings in her village, her rondavel had a round base, with stone walls and a conical thatched roof. When she burst inside, she found Soama waiting, looking gorgeous in an orange wrap and a beaded scarf. Abeke was not bad-looking herself, but had long ago lost the contest of beauty to her sister. In any case, she favored more practical clothing, and braids that could be tied back.

“Abeke!” Soama said. “Where have you been? Does Father know you’re back?”

“I went hunting,” Abeke explained proudly, the antelope still resting on her shoulders. “Alone.”

“You went outside? Past the gate?”

“Where else would I get an antelope?”

Soama put a brown hand over her eyes. “Abeke, why must you be so strange? You vanished. Father was worried! You’re late for your bonding ritual.”

“It’ll be all right,” Abeke assured her sister. “I’ll hurry. I’m not as fussy as you. Nobody will complain once they see my fine kill.”

Behind Abeke, the door opened. She turned and looked up at her father, a tall man, lean and muscular, with a shaved head. His eyes were not friendly. “Abeke! Chinwe told me you had returned. I was preparing a group to go search for you.”

“I wanted to offer a fine nameday gift,” Abeke explained. “I brought home this antelope.”

Breathing heavily, her father closed his eyes. He could barely keep control of his tone. “Abeke. Today is important. You are late. You are covered in dust and blood. Your disappearance has put the village in an uproar. Have you no sense? Have you no dignity?”

Abeke withered inside, her pride dissolving, her happiness spoiling. For a moment she could find no reply. Tears threatened to fall. “But . . . I came to no harm. You know how well I hunt. This was a surprise.”

Her father shook his head. “This was selfishness. Wrongheadedness. You cannot offer the antelope as your nameday gift! It is evidence of your misbehavior. What would it say about you? About us? What lesson will it teach other children? You will offer the jar you made.”

“But the jar is ugly!” Abeke said desperately. “An ape could make a better one. I have no talent there.”

“You make no effort there,” her father said. “Returning alive with a kill shows skill, but it also shows poor judgment. We will discuss a punishment later. Make yourself ready. I will go tell the

others that we will have your bonding ritual after all. Let Soama help you. If you would look to her example, you would disgrace us less.”

Abeke felt desolate. “Yes, Father.”

After her father left, Abeke unslung the antelope from her shoulders and set it down. Now that she was paying attention, she saw that her father was right — she was covered in dust and blood. She stared flatly at her fine kill. It had become a trophy of shame.

Abeke could barely restrain her tears. Today was supposed to be her day! Her one day. Everything was always about Soama. How thoughtful she was. How lovely. How talented. Today Abeke would drink the Nectar of Ninani. Would she call a spirit animal? Probably not. But today she became a woman. A true citizen of the village. And she had wanted to contribute a special gift.

Abeke wished for her mother. Her mother had understood her better than anyone. But her mother had never been strong, and had been taken by sickness.

Finally surrendering, Abeke started to weep.

“No time for that,” Soama ordered. “You’re late, and you look bad enough already.”

Gritting her teeth, Abeke fought her emotions. Did she want her sister to see her cry? “What should I do?”

Soama crossed to her and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “On second thought, maybe you should cry. We don’t have enough water to wash you.”

“I’m done crying.”

“Let’s get you clean.”

Abeke became as passive as a doll. She didn’t complain about the scratchy brushes or the barely damp cloth. She didn’t offer any opinions about her outfit or her accessories. Abeke let Soama arrange everything, and tried not to look at her antelope.

When Abeke emerged, she found the whole village waiting. After all, today was her day. Starting at her door, everyone stood in two long lines forming a pathway. Abeke had looked forward to this. It had been fun to do it for others.

Her father stared at her sternly — as did most of the other men. Some of the women observed her with disgust, others with pity. A few of her younger acquaintances snickered.

Abeke walked between the people of her village, keenly aware of how she had disappointed them. She wished she could run away and get eaten by a lion.

Instead, she clutched the awful jug at her side, held her head high, and kept walking. The wind had risen, blowing dust. A cloud muted the sun. Abeke did not smile. She kept her expression neutral.

Abeke followed the winding path of people. After she passed, the lines behind her collapsed as everyone followed her to her destination.

Up ahead, Abeke spotted Chinwe. Standing beyond the end of the path, she wore the green cloak only brought out for bonding rituals, draped casually over one shoulder. The tattoo of her wildebeest was visible on her thin, bare leg.

As Abeke approached, Chinwe started chanting. The villagers echoed each phrase using the old tribal language. Abeke didn’t know what most of the words meant, and neither did the others, but it was tradition.

When Abeke reached Chinwe, she knelt, feeling the gritty dirt beneath her bare knees. Still chanting, Chinwe dipped a small bowl into a large vessel and gazed down at Abeke. She didn’t look

angry or disapproving. She looked the same as she did during any bonding ritual — relaxed, and maybe a little bored.

Chinwe offered the bowl and Abeke accepted it. There was only a little fluid at the bottom, colorless like water, but thicker. She drank it. The Nectar tasted like unheated soup, the kind her mother used to make with crushed nuts. It was sweeter, but otherwise strikingly similar. The taste brought tears to Abeke's eyes.

Handing the bowl back, Abeke looked up at Chinwe curiously. Had that really been the Nectar? Or had Chinwe replaced the Nectar with root-and-nut soup? Chinwe took the bowl from Abeke and kept chanting.

Abeke felt unsteady, sort of dizzy and charged. Did everyone have this reaction? Her senses reached wide. She caught the vivid smell of rain on the wind. She could single out each individual chanting voice, and could tell who was off pitch. She could even hear her father and her sister.

The sky rumbled and darkened. The chanting broke off as everyone looked upward. Only once had Abeke seen a spirit animal called. Hano had done it, the grandnephew of the old Rain Dancer. Abeke had been six at the time, but she didn't recall any thunder. A soft glow had appeared behind Hano, and an anteater had ambled out of the radiance.

There was nothing soft about this light. A dazzling column blazed into existence, more intense than a bonfire, casting long shadows around the village. Several people shrieked. When the light disappeared, a leopard remained.

Buzzing from head to toe, Abeke stared in wonder. The leopard was large and sleek, almost the size of a lion. Her glossy hide was flawless. Out in the wild, standing this close to such a cat would have been the last thing Abeke ever did.

Nobody spoke. Muscles churning under her pelt, the great leopard walked to Abeke with liquid grace, and nuzzled her leg. Upon contact, the charge throughout Abeke's body vanished.

Acting on reflex, Abeke coiled slightly. The village suddenly seemed foreign and confining. She needed to get away! What if she jumped? She had the impression that if she desired, she could spring onto the nearest rooftop. She wanted to run free on the savannah, to prowl and hunt and climb.

The leopard rubbed against her hip and brought her back from the bewildering rush of instincts. Abeke straightened, hardly able to believe what was happening. The animal beside her could kill her with a single bite.

"It looks like Uraza," a child said, breaking the silence.

The comment started a wave of murmurs. The leopard prowled a few paces away from Abeke, almost as if uninterested, but then looked back. The cat did look like Uraza! She even had those legendary violet eyes, flashy as amethysts. But that was impossible. People didn't summon leopards. Cheetahs maybe, but never leopards or lions, let alone leopards with violet eyes.

Thunder grumbled overhead, and rain began to fall. What started gently soon became a downpour. People tilted their heads skyward, mouths open, arms extended. The crowd offered up laughter and joyful exclamations. A hand gripped Abeke's wrist. It was Chinwe. She wore a rare smile. "I believe we have found our new Rain Dancer."

The old Rain Dancer had died more than two years ago. Rain had not fallen on the village of Okaihee since. A few little storms had come close, but not a drop had landed within their walls. Several of the reliable wells had dried up. There had been much debate about how they would break the curse.

“A Rain Dancer?” Abeke marveled.

“It would be difficult to argue against it,” Chinwe said.

Abeke’s father approached, eyeing the leopard warily. “We should get indoors.”

Abeke squinted at him through the downpour. “Can you believe this?”

“Truly, I cannot.” He seemed distant. Was he still angry with her?

“Your daughter has ended our drought,” Chinwe said.

“So it would appear.”

“And she has summoned a leopard. Perhaps *the* leopard.”

Her father nodded pensively. “The lost guardian of Nilo. What does this mean, Chinwe?”

“I don’t know,” Chinwe said. “It goes against . . . I’ll have to consult someone who sees more deeply.”

Her father considered the leopard. “Is it safe?”

Chinwe shrugged. “As safe as any wild thing can be. It’s her spirit animal.”

Her father regarded Abeke, droplets bombarding his bald head. “The rain is making up for lost time. Come.”

Jogging after her father, her fancy wrap soaked, Abeke tried to understand why he seemed displeased. “Are you disappointed?” she ventured.

He stopped and gripped her shoulders, heedless of the rain. “I am confounded. I should be happy that you summoned an animal. But you have called a leopard! And not just any leopard — one that resembles our legendary guardian. In good ways and bad, you have always been different. And now this tops all of it! Will your beast bring good or evil upon you? Upon us? I don’t know what to think.”

The leopard gave a low growl, not terribly threatening, but not pleased either. Abeke’s father turned and led the way to their home. The leopard followed behind. When they reached the front door, they found a stranger waiting. He wore Euran clothing — boots, trousers, and a lavish blue cloak with the hood raised against the rain. The hood obscured his face.

Abeke’s father stopped near him. “Who are you?”

“I’m called Zerif,” the man replied in a lively voice. “I journeyed here from afar. Your daughter has accomplished the impossible, as was foretold weeks ago by Yumaris the Inscrutable, one of the wisest women in all of Erdas. What happened today will reshape the world. I’m here to help.”

“Then, enter,” her father said. “I am Pojalo.”

The three of them went through the doorway. The leopard followed smoothly.

Soama awaited them, her outfit damp but not soaked. She must have hurried indoors. “There it is,” she said, cautious eyes on the leopard. “Am I dreaming?”

“Isn’t she amazing?” Abeke said, hoping her sister would be impressed. The leopard briefly sniffed the room, then crouched beside Abeke. Stooping, Abeke stroked the damp fur, not minding the smell of it.

“I don’t feel safe,” Soama said. She looked to her father for help. “Must it be indoors with us?”

“She belongs with me,” Abeke replied immediately.

The stranger lowered his hood. He was middle-aged, with light brown skin and a neatly sculpted beard that only covered the end of his chin. “Perhaps I can help. This must all feel confusing. When you awoke today, Abeke, you could not have expected to alter the world’s destiny.”

“Where are you from, Zerif?” Pojalo asked.

“A traveler like me hails from all corners,” Zerif replied.

“Are you a Greencloak?” Abeke felt he had the confidence of a Greencloak, if not the garment.

“I am one of the Marked, but I do not wear the green cloak. I’m affiliated with them, but I concentrate on matters relating to the Great Beasts. Have you heard talk of the battles in southern Nilo?”

“Only rumors,” Pojalo said. “Foreign invaders. Our concerns of late have involved water and food.”

“These rumors are the groans of a dam about to burst,” Zerif said. “War will soon overtake not only all of Nilo, but all of Erdas. The Fallen Beasts are returning. Your daughter summoned one of them. This places her at the center of the conflict.”

Pojalo turned toward the leopard with alarm. “We thought it looked like . . .”

“Not just looks like,” Zerif corrected. “Abeke has summoned Uraza.”

“How . . . ?” Soama whispered, eyes wide and frightened.

“*How* is unanswerable,” Zerif said. “What she does now is the only question. I offer my assistance. You must act swiftly. This leopard will earn Abeke many enemies.”

“What do you suggest?” Pojalo asked. “She is our new Rain Dancer, and is much needed.”

“Her power,” Zerif stated somberly, “will bring much more than rain.”

Abeke frowned. This stranger Zerif clearly had plans for her, and her father seemed eager to hear him. Did he want to be rid of her? Would he act so eager if Soama had summoned this leopard?

Zerif rubbed his facial hair with two fingers. “We have much to do. First things first — you may have noticed that Uraza appears edgy. I suggest you either give the leopard the dead antelope, or else separate them.”



MEILIN SAT ON A CUSHION BEFORE HER LOOKING GLASS, meticulously applying facial paint. She didn't mind letting her handmaidens prepare her for festivals or banquets. But today was important. Today she wanted to look just right. And when you wanted something done right, you did it yourself.

After finishing the accents around her eyes, Meilin inspected her handiwork. It was a work of art atop a work of art. People always remarked that she was stunning. She had never needed paint on her face to earn compliments. But now she possessed an allure beyond her natural beauty.

Anybody could get the pale base and striking lips right. But Meilin knew some tricks her handmaidens didn't — how to properly blend the blush in her cheeks, how to use gold flecks near the eyes, and how a hint of imperfection made her hair more appealing.

Meilin practiced a shy smile. Then a delighted smile, followed by a look of surprise, and finally a scowl. Smoothing her hands over her snug silk robes, Meilin silently proclaimed her work complete.

There came a hesitant tap on the door. "Mistress," called a high voice sweetly. "Is everything all right? Can I offer any help?"

This was Kusha's polite way of informing her that the Bonding Day celebration was at a standstill. The most important people in the province were waiting on her. "I'm almost ready," Meilin answered. "I'll be out in a moment."

Meilin didn't want to make everyone wait too long, but making them wait a little would ensure that all eyes were on her. The other candidates had sampled the Nectar already. Meilin would drink it last, in the place of honor. The conventional wisdom was that the last person to drink the Nectar had the best chance of summoning a spirit animal.

As the daughter of General Teng, one of the five high commanders of the Zhongese military, Meilin had been guaranteed the last spot at the quarterly Bonding Day ceremonies since birth. As his only child, her importance was elevated further. She had no brother to steal her birthright.

Her mother had summoned a spirit animal, as had all four of Meilin's grandparents, and all eight of her great-grandparents. Her father, grandfather, and two of her great-grandfathers had been

generals. The least of the others had been powerful merchants. Only the family of the emperor could claim a better pedigree.

Her father had not called a spirit animal, but even so had risen higher in the military than any of his ancestors. He was a formidable man — nobody was more cunning, or more observant, or more wrathful when crossed. Her father had told her last night that he had foreseen she would summon a spirit animal today. She didn't know whether he had visited a soothsayer or beheld the vision himself, but he had acted certain, and he was never wrong.

Meilin gathered her parasol. Made of paper and intricately painted, it was strictly ornamental. She placed it over her shoulder and took a final look in the mirror.

A heavy fist pounded the door, startling her. This was no handmaiden.

“Yes?” Meilin called.

“Are you decent?” a male voice inquired.

“Yes.”

The door opened. It was General Chin, her father's closest aide, wearing his most formal uniform. How late was she?

“What is it, General?”

“My apologies for the intrusion,” he said. He paused, licking his lips. He seemed perturbed, almost unsure how to continue. “I have . . . unfortunate news. The invasion of Zhong has begun. We must hurry with the ceremony, and then move out.”

“Invasion?”

“Surely you know about the skirmishes in the southeast.”

“Of course.” Her father kept few secrets from her. But he had shared no suspicions of a serious threat.

“We just received word that they were but a prelude to a major incursion. Your father had prepared for something of the sort, but our enemies have more men and resources than even General Teng had guessed.” General Chin swallowed. “The city of Shar Liwao has fallen. We are officially at war.”

Meilin couldn't speak. She could hardly believe that General Chin was speaking the truth. Shar Liwao was one of the largest cities beyond the Wall, an important Zhongese port. Was this how wars started? On days that should have been happy? She suddenly felt ill, and wished she could be alone. Her father would be leaving soon. Zhong was powerful, and Erdas had no better general. He should be fine. But her father had described the uncertainties of war. A stray arrow could slay the mightiest hero. In wartime, none were truly safe.

“The entire city already fell?” Meilin had to ask.

“Yes. Reports are still coming in. The attack was lightning quick — an alliance of Zhongese rebels and foreign invaders.”

“I'll skip the ceremony,” Meilin said. “I can do it later.”

“No, the news just arrived. The public doesn't know yet. We want to keep it that way for now. Don't mention the attack. All must appear calm and normal.”

Meilin nodded. “Fine, I'll do my part. But it's an emergency. Father can go.”

“He insists you drink the Nectar before he leaves.”

Meilin followed General Chin out of her home. She ignored the questions of her handmaidens, who fell into step behind them. Their mansion adjoined the parade grounds, so it was not a long walk

to the ceremony.

Opening her parasol, Meilin strolled down the central aisle toward the stage. Thousands of people craned to see her. General Chin strode at her side, medals gleaming. People cheered. It seemed like an ordinary, festive occasion. These people had no clue what news was coming.

Near the stage, the bystanders were seated. More money and status meant more convenience and comfort. As Meilin approached, even the dignitaries and merchants and government officials arose and applauded.

Meilin forced the most natural smile she could manage. She gave small nods to faces she recognized. Everything felt brittle, fake. She wondered if the onlookers could see through her facade.

A boy at one side of the aisle yelled her name. It was Yenni, from her school. His father was a provincial official. He had made no secret of his affection for her, even though he was almost three years older. She gave him the shy smile. His face turned red and he grinned from ear to ear.

Meilin had never kissed a boy, although plenty had shown interest. She hated feeling like a trophy. Not only was her father rich, not only was he a popular general, but she was also attractive and refined. None of the boys actually knew her. She was just a prize, and there was no way of telling which aspect of the prize they wanted most.

She wondered how they would react if they knew her secret. Underneath the facial paint, beneath the expensive silks, she was not the dainty flower they imagined. She knew her manners. She could paint, she could serve tea, she could garden, she could recite poetry, she could sing. But her favorite pastime was hand-to-hand combat.

It had started innocently at age five. Her father was a general and a practical man. He had access to the best warriors in Zhong, and he'd wanted his daughter to learn the basics of defending herself. He had no idea how much aptitude she would demonstrate, nor how much she would enjoy it.

The training had gotten more serious each year. All in secret, she became the son her father never had. She could fight with knives, staves, and spears. She could use longbows, crossbows, and slings. But her favorite discipline involved combat using her hands and feet. A scant six weeks past her eleventh birthday, she could outmaneuver all but the greatest masters. She was slender, but strong. After she reached her adult size, she would be very formidable.

Meilin hoped that her spirit animal would augment her fighting skills. She knew that all sorts of powers could be derived from a strong relationship with a spirit animal. With the help of the right beast, good warriors became great, and great warriors became legends.

What species would benefit her most? Her father called her the Tiny Tiger. A tiger would be nice, or maybe a snow leopard. An ox could grant great strength. She tried not to set her heart on something too specific.

The crowd watched her enthusiastically. Only the top officials among them knew that war was coming. Soon they would all have much more than Nectar ceremonies to demand their attention.

When she reached the stage, Meilin folded her parasol and passed it to a handmaiden. She saw her father in the front of the crowd, dashing in his uniform, and gave a polite nod. She saw approval in his eyes. He was admiring her poise.

Many caged beasts were positioned on and around the stage, a royal menagerie including orangutans, tigers, pandas, foxes, alligators, cranes, baboons, pythons, ostriches, oxen, water buffalo, and even a pair of young elephants. Their province usually furnished a broad assortment, but this Bonding Day boasted the most variety she had seen. Her father had made sure of it.

On the stage awaited Sheyu, the leader of the local Greencloaks. He was dressed simply, and since his clouded leopard was not in sight, it was probably in its passive state. If she recalled correctly, he wore the tattoo on his chest.

Her father had mixed feelings about the Greencloaks. He respected them, but thought they had too much power and too many foreign ties. He didn't like their monopoly on the Nectar and how they used it to remain involved in everyone's affairs around the world.

Meilin was privately impressed by them. Her reasons were simple. The armies of Zhong did not invite women into their ranks, but the Greencloaks didn't fuss about such things. They measured people by their ability.

Meilin noticed a stranger on the stage. She had a foreign air about her, in both her dress and her features. Her feet were bare. She was short and thin, with that fragile look some men preferred. The feathers in her hair gave her away as an Amayan. An exotic multicolored bird stood on the stage beside her.

Sheyu beckoned Meilin. She went to him, remembering to face the crowd. It always looked amateurish when candidates turned their backs on the audience.

In a strident voice he proclaimed the ceremonial words — the same words he always said. Meilin told herself that if her father was wrong and no spirit animal appeared, she would keep composed. Her father had made his way in the world without one — she could as well.

Sheyu held a jade decanter to her lips. Meilin took a sip. The warm fluid was a bitter shock to her tongue — it took some effort to avoid gagging. Instead she forced herself to smile as she swallowed. For an unsteady moment Meilin was afraid she would choke on the taste, and then a fiery heat filled her belly. As the warmth radiated outward, her ears started ringing.

The sky was clear, but the sun dimmed. There was a brilliant flash and she was joined onstage by a black-and-white panda. It was large for the species, with disturbing silver eyes, just like Jhi on the Great Seal of Zhong.

The panda trundled over to Meilin and reared up to place its paws against her ribs. The fiery heat instantly drained away.

For a moment, Meilin felt profoundly relaxed. She was no longer playing a role in front of a crowd. She was simply herself. She basked in the warmth of the sun, and rejoiced in the gentle currents of the air around her.

Then the moment slipped away.

Meilin stared at her new spirit animal in bewilderment. A giant panda? Nobody called giant pandas, because Jhi had been a giant panda, and Jhi was a Great Beast, one of the Fallen. A large statue of Jhi stood in the far corner of the parade ground, huge and somewhat ridiculous. A panda was basically the opposite of a tiger. More silly and cute than impressive or threatening. What skills would it bestow on a fighter? The ability to eat bamboo?

The audience made no sound. Meilin found her father's eyes. He looked shocked.

The Amayan woman had come to her side. "I'm Lenori," she said quietly. "I'm here to help you."

"Are you a Greencloak?"

"I'm not wearing it, but yes. Do you realize what you've done?"

"I'm not supposed to be able to summon a panda."

"Exactly." Lenori took her hand and raised it high. "Meilin has fulfilled a prophecy that most have forgotten! Jhi the Fallen has returned to Erdas! Let us all —"

Lenori never finished her sentence, because the alarm bells started to ring, a gonging clamor reserved for emergencies. Meilin scanned the parade ground, alert. Was this connected to the invasion? That made no sense. Shar Liwao was far away, beyond the Wall of Zhong. Just as Meilin remembered to guard her expression, the great horns on the city wall sounded three times — long, low notes that warned of immediate danger.

The audience began to stir and exclaim. Aware that many eyes remained on her, Meilin held very still, trying to appear undisturbed. This was no practice exercise; the horns confirmed that. Something was horribly wrong. Did she smell smoke? It was hard to see much beyond the high walls of the parade ground.

Then the screaming began. Toward the rear of the parade ground, beyond the carefully monitored seats of the dignitaries, fighting broke out. Men and women flung off cloaks, many summoning spirit animals. Swords and axes began to cut down bystanders. As people pressed to get away, a bull charged through the crowd. A trio of arrows curved through the air to thunk down on the stage.

Meilin ignored the arrows, even though one landed close enough to kick it. The invasion was supposed to be far away, beyond the Wall! She had heard of riots in some of the outlying towns before, but nothing like that had ever happened in Jano Rion. It was a model city, one of the mightiest in all of Zhong.

With a flash, Sheyu released his spirit animal. The clouded leopard gave a savage cry. Sheyu pulled on a glove fitted with four sharp blades. With his other hand, he seized Meilin by the upper arm, giving a yank to start her moving. “They must have come for you!” he yelled.

As she stumbled after him toward the rear of the stage, Meilin craned to see the parade ground. Guards were engaging the rebels. Spear met sword, ax met shield. Some weapons found their mark. Men and women screamed. Meilin knew much about battle through her father, but until now, she had never seen anyone killed. In a few brief seconds, she saw death, and more of it than she could handle. Her last glimpse, before she jumped off the stage beside Sheyu, was of Kusha, her chief handmaiden, falling to her knees with an arrow buried in her back.

Meilin’s father was there to steady her. General Chin waited at his side, along with Lenori. “Hurry,” her father urged. “We must get to the tower. We need to survey the city.”

The words roused her. “Right,” she said, glancing back just in time to see her panda jump gracelessly from the stage. At least Jhi appeared unharmed.

Would Kusha die from that arrow? It had looked bad.

Her father ran toward the door behind the stage. Meilin followed, with Sheyu nearby. From one side, several armed rebels raced to block their retreat. A large dog ran with them, and a red panda, and an ibex with tall backswept horns.

Generals Teng and Chin drew their swords at the same time. Veering away from the door, they met the rebels violently. Pulling on a second clawed glove, Sheyu rushed to join them.

Meilin wanted to help but she was unarmed, and the enemies had weapons. She looked around frantically for a weapon, but found none.

General Chin and her father engaged the enemy with the same poise they used on the practice floor. They worked in tandem, deflecting attacks, dispatching foes, and pivoting to lend each other assistance. Sheyu and his clouded leopard ducked and weaved among the rebels, narrowly dodging attacks and efficiently slashing opponents.

Lenori dragged Meilin to the door. Jhi stayed near her. As a second group of rebels approached, Sheyu and the generals fell back.

With blood flowing freely from his shoulder, General Chin opened the door with a key. "Hurry!" he cried. The group streamed through, and General Chin locked the door behind them.

Meilin's father took off at a run, leading them along the hallway within the parade-ground wall. Meilin stayed right behind him. The thick walls muffled the tumult from the parade ground, so their footfalls echoed loudly. Glancing over her shoulder, Meilin saw Lenori's bird hopping and fluttering along. The panda brought up the rear, hurrying just enough to stay close.

Meilin could tell where her father was headed. The lookout station at the corner of the parade ground offered one of the highest vantages of Jano Rion. They would be able to see most of the city and much beyond. It was the quickest way for him to assess the situation.

As they raced along the hallway, Meilin resisted asking questions. Had they been alone it would have been different. But in mixed company, her father would volunteer information as he desired.

The soldiers at the base of the lookout tower straightened and saluted as her father drew near. He gave a quick salute back and climbed onto the lifter.

"What is that?" Lenori asked hesitantly.

"An ingenious device," Sheyu explained. "Counterweights will raise the platform to the top of the tower."

They all stepped onto the platform. The panda showed no hesitation. Meilin stared into those silver eyes as the lifter rose briskly. Despite the chaos around them, the panda appeared serene and disturbingly knowing. Meilin looked away first.

When the lifter reached the top, Meilin's father hustled them out onto the observation terrace. Soldiers with telescopes paused to salute.

"Carry on," her father said.

The ranking officer approached, but her father waved him away, preferring to use his own faculties to assess the situation. Meilin stood beside him, eyes wide, hardly believing what she was seeing.

Jano Rion was under attack. The capital of the province and one of the largest cities in Zhong had battles raging within and without. A huge host charged the city walls, rushing across the plain like a flood. Rebels swept through clusters of defenders trying to organize themselves. Many ran alongside animals. Others rode animals. They carried swords and spears, maces and axes. Where had they come from? Why had there been no warning?

The city was burning. Black smoke billowed up from at least a dozen locations that Meilin could see. The old academy where she attended classes was aflame! That ancient building had stood for centuries. Her ancestors had studied there and now Meilin watched it fall. Fierce skirmishes came in and out of view down on the streets. Meilin craned to see, but buildings and trees blocked much of the action.

Meilin's heart squeezed as she glanced up at her father's stoic face. She could tell he was shocked, but he hid it well. Those who did not know him intimately might not recognize how deeply he was stunned. He held out a hand for a telescope. Raising it to one eye, he focused on a few areas beyond the city wall, then a few within.

"So many have spirit animals," he murmured.

General Chin had his own spyglass. “Unprecedented. There hasn’t been an army like this since . . .”

“The Devourer,” her father finished.

Meilin blinked. The Devourer was a legend from the past, a monster in nursery stories. Why would her father mention him at a time like this?

“Where did they all come from?” Sheyu asked. “How could that army have gotten past the Wall of Zhong without a single guard noticing?”

Meilin looked to her father. She had wanted to pose the same question. “They wear no uniforms,” he said. “They didn’t win through by force. They must have trickled in — perhaps over years. Many look Zhongese, but not all. It staggers me to consider the logistics involved. I would have named an attack of this scale impossible, yet here they are! The strength of Zhong is concentrated far from here, along our outer Wall. Many soldiers now travel toward Shar Liwao. But that was evidently a diversion.”

“What must we do?” General Chin asked.

“We will do our duty,” General Teng said. He raised his voice. “Leave us.”

The other soldiers abandoned the observation terrace. Sheyu took Lenori by the arm and turned to go.

“Not you, Greencloaks,” General Teng said, his voice a quiet growl. He kept a hand on Meilin’s shoulder, so she knew he wanted her there as well.

Sheyu and Lenori drew closer.

Meilin watched her father. His expression made her uncomfortable. She tried to suppress the fear gnawing inside.

“Jano Rion will fall,” he said plainly. “We don’t have enough defenders here to resist. Lenori, you claim that Meilin has summoned Jhi herself, the living symbol of Zhong. What does it mean? What do you propose?”

“I wish to bring her to our commander,” Lenori said. “Jhi is not the first of the Four Fallen to return in recent weeks. This war is coming to all of Erdas. We mean to reunite the Four Fallen and fight. It’s our only chance.”

Meilin felt the hand on her shoulder tighten. Her father gave a single nod. “So be it. Lenori, take my daughter. This is no place for her at present. Sheyu, please see that they embark safely from the port at Xin Kao Dai.”

Sheyu placed a fist to his chest and inclined his head. “It would be my honor.”

“Father, I don’t want to go!” Meilin cried. “Please let me stay with you. Please let me defend our home!”

“It is not safe for you —”

“Where would I be safer than with the greatest general in all of Erdas?”

“And,” he continued, holding up a hand to stay her, “you may have vital duties elsewhere.” He crouched to look her straight in the eyes. “Meilin, visit with this Greencloak commander. Hear him out. If he talks sense, and the path feels true, lend the aid that duty requires. If not, seek a better path. In either instance, do not forget who you are, or where you come from.”

“But —”

General Teng shook his head. “This is my will.”

Meilin knew that the conversation was over. Her fate had been decided. Hot tears stung her eyes. She looked out at the army charging toward her home, then down at the ravaging traitors already at work in the parade ground. How could she run away, leaving her father to face this threat, his army divided and already half-defeated?

She glanced over at Jhi. The panda returned her gaze with understanding and perhaps a hint of pity. Was she imagining the empathy in those penetrating eyes? Meilin stared at the ground. She didn't need understanding. She needed strength. Not only did this panda have little chance of improving her combat skills, it was also the reason the Greencloaks were taking her away.

Away from her home. Away from her father.

A clamor arose from the stairwell. An injured soldier staggered to the top of the stairs. "They're coming up! There's too many!"

Meilin's father gave a nod. "Hold them as long as you can."

The soldier turned and hobbled back down the stairs. Unseen weapons clashed. An animal screamed. Moving to the top of the stairs, General Chin drew his sword.

Meilin's father pulled the levers that lowered the lifter, then gestured to a ladder that descended the interior of the shaft. "Climb down to the first access tunnel. It should allow you to slip by the rebels. Get out of the city."

Meilin couldn't hold back her worries. "What about —"

Her father sliced his hand through the air and silenced her. "General Chin and I will confirm you reach the tunnel, then we'll make our escape." He gave his daughter a strained smile. "I won't let this rabble take me. Go."

There was no room for argument. Meilin would not shame him with further pleas or disagreements.

Meilin raised her eyes to his. "As you wish, Father."

The others were already heading down the ladder. She was mildly astonished to find Jhi capable of descending unaided. As Meilin placed her foot on the first rung, General Chin engaged his first foe. Just before her head passed down into the shaft, she saw General Chin and her father backing up, swords flashing, pressed by numerous opponents.

She kept silent. If the enemies noticed her descent, her father's efforts would be in vain. Maybe he would still get away. He was a cunning man.

With tears blurring her vision, Meilin joined the others in the cramped tunnel. Taking her hand, Sheyu led the way.



ESSIX

ROLLAN LOITERED ON THE CORNER BY THE APOTHECARY, keeping his back to the store. Down the cobbled street, between buildings with thick plaster walls and rounded facades, Smarty and Red were looking his way. Rollan tried to convey with his eyes that they shouldn't draw attention to him. They got the message and faced elsewhere.

An orphan since age five, Rollan knew that stealing was part of survival. Even so, he avoided it whenever possible. He had no problem with claiming leftovers, since the owners were done with them. People with money abandoned all sorts of things. Rollan had found clever ways to lay claim to unfinished meals and discarded clothing. That was salvaging, not thievery.

But his current problem would not be solved through scrounging. There was no such thing as leftover willow extract. It was too valuable. He and the boys used to have some, thanks to Hands, but it had run out. And now Digger had a terrible fever. They had wasted the precious medicine on less serious sicknesses. Had they known this was coming, they would have saved some, but it was too late.

They wouldn't be in this mess if Hands hadn't gotten arrested. The boy had a gift for pilfering, and life had been much more comfortable with him around. But Hands got greedy and started going after real valuables. The militia caught him and locked him up.

Rollan glanced over his shoulder at the apothecary. As with many businesses in town, a banner emblazoned with Essix the Falcon, patron beast of Amaya, hung over the entrance. Digger really needed help. He was burning up, and it kept getting worse. Without medicine, he could die.

Folding his arms, Rollan scowled at the ground. He didn't like to steal, but it wasn't out of deep respect for the law. Many of the profiteers in Concorba made their fortunes on the backs of the poor, taking everything they could from people who had almost nothing, and the laws protected that system. Stealing was just too risky. When kids got caught taking even the smallest thing, the penalties were harsh, especially as you got older. Plus he had his honor. His own version of it anyway — never to take from the poor, never from the sick or infirm, and always to try other alternatives first.

The other boys teased Rollan for his reluctance to pinch things. They had tried to nickname him Justice, but he had forcefully declined. Actually, he had dodged all of their attempted nicknames, which was why he was the only guy in the group without one.

No matter how he looked at it, stealing from the apothecary would be difficult. The owner had an unfriendly reputation. His employees were vigilant, and they turned troublemakers over to the militia. Rollan had warned the others not to go after the extract. Hands could have managed it, but nobody else had a fraction of his skill.

Rollan wasn't above asking for help. Begging had been good to him. Certain bakeries and inns didn't mind handing over stale bread or other unwanted food. But times were hard and getting harder. Amaya was a young continent, much of it still untamed, and even in a big town like Concorba, if a harvest went poorly or if pirates harassed the importers, pretty soon everyone felt the squeeze. Those at the bottom of the pecking order felt it the worst.

There wasn't time to beg for enough money to buy the extract. Rollan had decided he would swipe it if he could — after all, the life of a friend outweighed some rule. But after casing the store, he didn't think success was possible. Should he try anyway?

Rollan had asked for help from everywhere that made sense. Except at the apothecary. Unlikely as that option seemed, it might be more fruitful than the alternative. Steeling himself, he went inside.

The owner, Eloy Valdez, stood behind the counter in a white apron. He had bushy gray sideburns and a receding hairline. His eyes locked on Rollan, who always drew attention when he entered a business. Even in his best clothes, he was too young and too scruffy.

Rollan walked directly to the owner. "Good afternoon, Mr. Valdez." Rollan tried on his brightest smile. He knew beneath the grime he was a handsome kid, with his dark tousled hair and tan skin, but there was a *lot* of grime.

"Hello, boy," the man replied, his gaze suspicious. "Can I help you?"

"Not me so much as a friend," Rollan said. "He has a horrible fever. This is the third day and it keeps getting worse. I'm an orphan, him too. He needs willow extract. I don't have money, but I can work hard, help tidy up, whatever you need."

Mr. Valdez made the I-wish-I-could-help-you face Rollan had seen so often. "That's an expensive remedy. And it's in short supply these days, making it more costly still."

"I don't mind putting in a lot of work," Rollan offered.

Mr. Valdez sucked air through his teeth. "You know how times are. My two assistants already take care of everything. I have no spare chores, and plenty of qualified men waiting for a vacancy. Sorry."

Rollan's cheeks burned with shame, but Digger needed him. "Maybe you could get creative? You know, to help stop a kid from dying?"

"You want charity," Mr. Valdez said knowingly. "I'm afraid I have a strict no-charity policy. Medicines are pricey. If your friend were the only soul in town who couldn't pay, I'd surely lend a hand. But endless people have desperate needs and no money. If I give you a free remedy, I should provide for all the others as well. I'd be out of business in a week."

"I won't tell anyone where it came from," Rollan promised. "You might not be able to help everyone, but you can help him. Please, Mr. Valdez. He's got nobody."

"Secrets like free willow extract don't keep," Mr. Valdez said. "Besides, your tale may be true, but some such stories might not be. How am I supposed to tell the difference? I can't help you. Good day."

Rollan had been dismissed. What options were left? If he returned after this, Mr. Valdez would study his every move. Stealing the extract was no longer a possibility. “How would you feel if you were alone in some alley, sick, no place to go, and everyone ignored you?”

“That’s why I don’t live on the streets,” Mr. Valdez said. “That’s why I worked hard to get where I am, and why I intend to stay here. The needs of an urchin are not my obligation.”

“Hard work doesn’t always get you off the streets,” Rollan said, frustration surging through him. “It won’t always keep you off them either. What if your store burned down?”

Mr. Valdez narrowed his eyes. “Is that a threat?”

Rollan raised both hands. “No! I just mean bad luck can strike anywhere.”

“Aldo!” Mr. Valdez called. “This person needs help finding the door.”

The cause was lost. Rollan decided he could stop licking Mr. Valdez’s boots. “You need help finding a heart. I hope you catch something without a remedy. Something besides old age.”

A large man with his sleeves rolled back over thick, hairy arms strode in from the back of the store. He came straight toward Rollan. Behind him, Smarty ducked behind the apothecary counter.

How had Smarty gotten in here? Through the back door? What was he thinking? His nickname was a joke, not a compliment. He was going to get them both busted! Rollan tried not to stare at his friend. Instead he watched Aldo approach.

“You thick?” Aldo barked. “Beat it!”

Rollan sidled toward the door, trying not to move too quickly. He needed to get out of there, but if he ran off, Smarty would get nabbed for sure.

Aldo closed the distance, seized Rollan roughly by the back of his neck, and marched him toward the doorway. “Don’t let us catch you in here again,” the big man warned.

“Aldo!” Mr. Valdez cried.

Looking back, Rollan saw Smarty speeding toward the back of the store.

“He took a packet of willow extract!” Mr. Valdez shouted. “Santos!”

Aldo dragged Rollan toward the rear of the store. “Get back here or your friend gets it!” the big man yelled.

Smarty never glanced back. By the time Aldo reached the back door, Smarty was out of sight.

“Santos!” Mr. Valdez cried, joining them. “Where’s Santos?”

“On that errand, remember?” Aldo said.

Mr. Valdez turned furious eyes on Rollan. “All that talk about working to pay off the debt — you were setting me up while your accomplice snuck in here! Very low, even for scum.”

“He did it on his own,” Rollan insisted.

“Save it, kid,” Aldo said. “You helped steal the goods, you’ll do the time.”

Rollan kicked out at Aldo’s knee, but the big man took it without a flinch. Rollan could feel the strength of the hand on his neck.

“Your next appointment is with the militia,” Mr. Valdez said.

Rollan knew there was no point in arguing. At least Digger would get his remedy.



The city militia kept a line of cells in the basement of their headquarters. Mildew thrived on the damp walls, and ancient straw littered the discolored stone floor. The interior barriers were composed of iron bars, allowing the prisoners to see each other. Rollan sat on a decaying wicker mat. Men

occupied three of the other cells. One man was sickly and gaunt, another had slept since Rollan arrived, and the third looked like the sort Rollan had learned to avoid. He was probably in here for something serious.

A guard had informed Rollan that he would go before a judge tomorrow. He was young enough that they might send him back to the orphanage. The thought gave him shivers. There was no worse racket than the orphanage in Concorba. The head guy lived well because he fed the kids the absolute minimum, made them work like slaves, dressed them like beggars, and never wasted resources on things like medicine. Rollan had run off for a reason. He suspected he might actually prefer prison.

A door opened, and boots clomped down the stairs. Were they bringing in a new prisoner? Rollan arose for a better look. No, the jailer was alone. He was portly with a stubbly jaw. Holding a ledger, he came to Rollan's cell. "How old are you?"

Was this a trick question? Would it benefit him more to seem older or younger? Rollan wasn't sure, so he answered honestly. "I'm twelve next month."

The man made a notation. "You're an orphan."

"Actually I'm a lost prince. If you take me back to Eura, my father will reward you."

"When did you run away from the orphanage?"

Rollan considered the question, and found no reason to fib. "I was nine."

"Have you had your Nectar?"

The question mildly surprised him. "No."

"You know what happens if you don't take the Nectar?"

"A bonding could happen naturally."

"That's right. It's against our town statutes not to drink the Nectar within three months of turning eleven."

"Good thing I'm already behind bars. Want some advice? You guys should make a law against eleven-year-olds dying because they have no medicine!"

The jailer harrumphed. "This is no game, boy."

"Does it sound like a game?" Rollan said. "Have you ever played dying-alone-of-a-fever-because-willow-bark-costs-too-much? Look, just add my lack of Nectar to my list of charges. For the record, nobody ever offered me any."

"The militia gives Nectar to any children of age who haven't received it."

"You guys deserve more medals," Rollan said.

The jailer held up a scolding finger. "If you have the potential to summon a spirit animal, it'll happen on its own by age twelve or thirteen. But do you know what could happen to you without the Nectar? The bond is a gamble. Drives some people mad, others to illness. Some die on the spot. Others are fine."

"But with the Nectar it's always stable," Rollan said.

"The Great Beasts may not have done much for us lately, but we'll always owe Ninani for the Nectar. But to benefit, you have to use it."

Rollan huffed. "What are the chances I'd call an animal? Like a hundred to one? Less?"

The jailer ignored him. "I know a Greencloak who tends to orphans. I'll send her around by and by."

The jailer turned and climbed the stairs. Rollan stretched, pivoting at the waist, then raising his hands high.

“I didn’t expect a show today,” said the gaunt man in the farthest cell. “What do you think you’ll call?”

“Nothing,” Rollan said.

“I thought the same,” the gaunt man said. “I was wrong. I called a hedgehog.”

“You’re a Greencloak?” Rollan asked, surprised.

The gaunt man snorted. His eyes looked lost, his posture exhausted. “You see any cloak? My animal got killed. The absence left me . . . I wish I’d lost a limb instead.”

An hour later, maybe two, the jailer returned with a couple of uniformed militiamen and a Greencloak. She was in her late teens and of medium height. Her face wasn’t very pretty, but it was kind.

The jailer unlocked the cell gate and beckoned for Rollan to step out. One of the militiamen held a small cage with a rat inside.

Exiting the cell, Rollan nodded at the rat. “Is that a joke?”

“They say folks bond more easily if animals are present,” the militiaman said with a jeering smile. “We caught him a couple years back. He’s our mascot.”

“Very funny,” Rollan said dryly. “Should we hunt for some spiders? Maybe a cockroach?”

“People don’t bond with insects,” the Greencloak said, “although there is some precedence for summoning arachnids.”

“I’ll bet a copper piece he calls nothing,” said the prisoner who Rollan thought looked like trouble. The man patted his pockets. “Wait, two.” He produced them. “Any takers?”

Nobody agreed to the bet.

“Should we do it?” Rollan suggested, breaking the awkward silence. For some kids the summoning ceremony was a big deal. They got all dressed up with their families, spectators attended, lectures were given, refreshments served. He was in a dirty jail with a rat, his guards, and his fellow prisoners. He just wanted to get it over with.

The Greencloak produced a simple flask. She uncapped it and held it out to him. “Only takes a swallow.”

“That was quite a speech,” Rollan said, accepting the flask. “Your talents are wasted in dank basements. You’re ready to work aboveground.” He took a sip. There was a restaurant that sometimes gave him sweetened cinnamon toast, his favorite treat. The Nectar tasted sort of like that, but liquefied.

Rollan wiped his lips. As the Greencloak reached for her flask, Rollan swayed. Sparks zinged through his body. What was going on? He held out the flask, but his arm felt unsteady. The Greencloak took the flask and Rollan dropped to his knees.

“What’s wrong with me?” Rollan slurred.

The entire jail rumbled and the room grew dark. Or was his vision failing? A blinding light appeared, lingered for a moment, and then vanished.

A falcon had joined them in the room, large and powerful, the feathers a brownish gold with white speckles on the breast. With a flurry of wings, the raptor leaped up to Rollan’s shoulder. When the claws pinched into his skin, the sparking sensation ceased. The others stared, dumbfounded.

For a moment, Rollan’s eyes seemed unusually keen. He was able to see the porous textures of the stone floor and walls. He spotted a spider hiding amid the wafting cobwebs in a high corner and felt

the startled moods of those around him with abnormal clarity. And then, all of a sudden, he was back to normal.

“It’s a falcon!” the Greencloak marveled. “A gyrfalcon . . . with amber eyes!”

“*She’s* a falcon,” Rollan clarified. “She’s a girl.”

“How do you know that?” the jailer asked.

Rollan paused. “I just do.”

“She would be female, I suppose,” the Greencloak murmured. Seeming to snap out of a trance, she stared at Rollan searchingly. “How is this possible? Who are you?”

“Just some orphan,” Rollan said.

“There has to be more to it than that,” she muttered, half to herself.

“I’m also a criminal,” Rollan volunteered. “The worst kind of criminal, actually.”

“What kind is that?” the Greencloak asked.

“The kind who got caught,” Rollan replied.

The Greencloak glanced at the jailer. “Put him back in his cell. I’ll be back.”

“The bird too?” the jailer asked.

“Naturally,” the Greencloak replied. “It’s his spirit animal.”

“Guess it was my lucky day,” mumbled the seedy prisoner. “Nobody took my bet. I get to keep my coppers.”



It was not long before the jailer escorted a man to Rollan’s cell. The stranger looked like some sort of foreign lord. He wore high boots, leather gauntlets, a fancy sword, and an embroidered blue cloak that Rollan guessed cost more than a team of horses. The man had a neatly trimmed beard on his chin, and gazed at Rollan with interest.

“Would you like to get out of here, Rollan?” the man asked.

“I might miss the itchy mat and the black stuff that rubs off the bars,” Rollan said. “Sometimes we don’t appreciate what we have until we lose it.”

The man smiled, but with the hint of a sneer.

“Why isn’t your cloak green?” Rollan asked.

“My name is Duke Zerif,” the man said. “I work with the Greencloaks, but I’m not one of them. They send me to help with cases like yours.”

“Cases like mine?”

Zerif glanced at the jailer. “Better if we converse in private. I’ve paid your bail.”

“Fine with me,” Rollan said.

The jailer opened the cell door. Rollan stepped out, the bird on his shoulder, and exited with Zerif, never glancing at the other prisoners, not saying a word to anyone. What did this guy want?

When they reached the street, Zerif looked over at him. “That is a superior bird.”

“Thanks,” Rollan grunted. “What now?”

“Today your new life begins,” Zerif said. “We have much to discuss.”

“Bail isn’t a pardon. What about Mr. Valdez?”

“The charges will be dropped. I’ll take care of it.”

Rollan gave a slight nod. “What about the girl who gave me the Nectar? Where is she?”

Zerif flashed a cocky grin. “These matters exceed her expertise. You are no longer her assignment. Come.”

The falcon gave Rollan’s shoulder a brief, painful squeeze with her talons. Despite her weight, Rollan had nearly forgotten her presence. Something about the timing of the squeeze, and the way Zerif had spoken about the girl, made Rollan uneasy. “Is she all right?”

Did a trace of admiration creep into Zerif’s grin? “I’m sure she’s fine.”

He was lying and Rollan knew it. Zerif even seemed to respect that Rollan suspected him. Rollan felt a disturbing certainty that Zerif had done something to the Greencloak. Just who was this guy?

Zerif hurried them down the street. “Where are we going?” Rollan asked.

“A quiet place to talk. Then far away from here, if you like. Have you ever yearned to see the world? That bird is your ticket.”

The falcon shrieked loud enough to hurt Rollan’s ears. Zerif’s eyes darted between the bird and Rollan, his smile faltering a bit.

“She doesn’t like you,” Rollan realized.

“She’s just testing her voice,” Zerif answered. “I mean you no harm.” Rollan would have bet two coppers that he was lying. His response had almost sounded relaxed, but Zerif was definitely acting. And he was wearing a large sword.

“What is that woman doing?” Rollan asked, pointing across the street.

As Zerif turned to look, Rollan ran. They had passed an alley, and he turned and sprinted down it. Halfway along the alley, Rollan risked a glance back and saw Zerif in pursuit, blue cloak flapping behind him. The man had jerked his sleeve back and the mark on his forearm flashed. A canine creature landed in front of him, already running. What was it? A coyote?

Rollan had hoped that the lordly stranger would be above chasing him. Apparently not. But the coyote proved that Zerif was one of the Marked. Maybe he was a Greencloak after all. Still, Rollan didn’t trust him and neither did the bird. He needed to ditch him fast.

Rollan had some experience escaping down alleyways. He ran hard, and extended his hands to topple crates and rubbish bins into the path of his pursuers. In spite of his efforts, he could hear them gaining. Visions of coyote teeth and the thought of Zerif’s expensive sword impelled him to run faster.

Rounding a corner, Rollan raced into another alley. He passed an occasional door, not daring to try it in case it was locked, or that whoever lay beyond might not aid him. He had learned the hard way that an orphan in flight had few friends. He glanced up, looking for a way up to the rooftops, but there was nothing in view. The man and the coyote kept gaining.

Ahead on the left, Rollan saw a fence between buildings. He jumped, grabbed the splintery top of it, and kicked one leg over. With a snarl, the coyote leaped for his dangling leg. Teeth tore through his pant leg and scraped his skin, nearly yanking him from the wall.

“Come down from there!” Zerif ordered, racing forward with his sword drawn.

Rollan rolled over the top of the fence and fell into a weedy lot with a shanty in one corner. A ragged man glared at him unwelcomingly from the shadows of his hovel. Springing to his feet, Rollan dashed across the lot. As he approached the fence on the far side, Rollan glanced back. The coyote streaked across the lot toward him, but there was no sign of Zerif. Had he tossed his spirit animal over the fence? Rollan scanned the scraggly ground ahead as he ran for something to use as a weapon but saw nothing. The coyote was closing in. He knew he would barely win the race to the fence. No way would he get up and over without getting mauled.

When Rollan reached the fence, he jumped and grabbed the top with both hands as if he meant to climb, then turned in midair to kick the coyote springing at him square in the muzzle. The blow connected cleanly, and the coyote hit the ground with a yelp. Rollan was up the fence and over before the animal had recovered.

The alley he landed in was wider. As he debated which direction to go, Zerif shot around a far corner, running with superhuman speed. Rollan couldn't run half as fast as Zerif was moving. Zerif had gone around most of the block in the time it had taken Rollan to cross the lot. Rollan had heard stories about the powers the Marked could receive from their bonds. How could he escape from someone like that? He turned and ran the opposite way.

Racing around another corner, Rollan found himself sprinting toward a large man in a forest-green cloak astride a moose. There was no time to digest the bizarre sight. The moose barreled toward him, its massive antlers spanning almost the full width of the alley. The gray-haired man astride it had a thick build and a fleshy face framed by a bristly beard. He clutched a mace in one hand. A mail shirt jangled under his cloak.

"Out of my way, boy!" the Greencloak bellowed.

Lunging sideways, Rollan flattened himself against the wall of the alley as the moose charged past. He heard a shriek above him and the scrape of talons on metal as his bird landed on the roof.

Zerif and the coyote bolted around the corner, skidding to a halt when they saw the oncoming moose. The Greencloak gave a battle cry and raised his mace. Zerif shouldered through the first door he reached, probably the back entrance to some business. The Greencloak paused for a moment, as if about to give chase, before he rode back to Rollan.

"What name did he give?" he barked.

"That guy? Zerif."

"That much was true. Do you know him?"

"I just met him. He bailed me out of jail."

The man dismounted. "What did he tell you?"

"Not much," Rollan said. "He wanted to take me away."

"I expect he did," the man said. "We call Zerif 'the Jackal' after his spirit animal, a cunning creature native to Nilo. He works for our archenemy, the Devourer."

"The Devourer?" Rollan said. It seemed so improbable he almost choked. "Are you serious? Who are you?"

"My name is Olvan."

Rollan glanced at the huge moose and back again. No way. It couldn't be. "*The Olvan?*" he said, shocked into a whisper.

"If by that you mean the worldwide commander of the Greencloaks, then yes, *the Olvan.*"

The gyrfalcon shrieked and swooped down to land on Rollan's shoulder. Rollan reached up to stroke her feathers. He paused a long moment before he spoke. "Suddenly everyone wants to be my friend. Both of you showed up so quickly. Is this about my falcon?"

"She is not *your* falcon, son. She is *the Falcon.*" Olvan let the words sink in. "You have summoned Essix back into the world."



TRAINING

ABEKE SAT ON THE EDGE OF A FEATHER BED. HER ROOM HAD a carved desk, an elaborate sofa, cushioned chairs, and a mirror framed in what she thought might be real gold — all for her personal use. Everyone she encountered treated her respectfully and a servant delivered tasty meals. Her leopard had turned her into royalty.

The room gently rocked from side to side. To think such luxury was available on a ship! Abeke would not have believed it had she not seen it.

She appreciated the courteous treatment, but did not feel comfortable in the fancy room. It was too different from home. There were no familiar faces or even familiar ways.

Zerif had not joined her on the voyage. At the dock, he had explained that urgent matters called him elsewhere, and entrusted her in the care of a stranger, a boy named Shane. After everything she had lost, the extra separation had stung.

Less than a week earlier, Zerif had convinced her father that Abeke needed to leave Okaihee, not just for her personal safety, but for the good of the village. Pojalo had promptly agreed. Part of Abeke wished her father had struggled more with the decision. She could not help wondering whether he would have relinquished Soama so swiftly. With the approval of her father, Zerif had smuggled Abeke and Uraza away that same night.

Abeke regretted never talking to Chinwe before leaving. Chinwe had thought that Abeke would be the village's new Rain Dancer. They certainly needed one. In the rush to heed Zerif's advice, she had ignored the needs of her community. What if her absence meant the drought would continue? What if she had shirked her destiny? What if she had missed her chance finally to fit in?

Despite the comforts aboard the ship, Abeke missed her father and sister. Back home, they had all shared one room. They had routines, meals together, and Abeke was used to falling asleep to the sound of her father snoring. Each night on the ship, Abeke struggled to find sleep. Nothing felt familiar.

At first there had been too many new experiences to get homesick — an exciting coach ride, a busy city, a sea of endless water too salty to drink, and then a ship big enough to hold most of the people in

her village. It was only after they set sail that Abeke started to feel restless. She had time to think. She had time to miss prowling the savannah. She had time to wish for familiar faces.

At least she had Uraza. Abeke rubbed the leopard's neck and the big cat purred, the vibrations tickling her palm. Uraza was not particularly affectionate, but she never rejected Abeke's stroking.

A knock came at her door. It had to be Shane. He was the other pleasant part of the voyage. He had been helping her learn to improve her connection with Uraza.

"Come in," Abeke said.

Shane opened the door. At twelve, he was only one year older than she was. He was pale, but handsome, with a sturdy build and a relaxed competence that she admired. Like her, he had a spirit animal — a wolverine.

"Ready to go to the hold?" he asked.

"I thought you'd never come," Abeke said. "I'm not used to being penned up."

He stood in the doorway, considering her. "It's hard to leave all you know behind. I had to leave my parents too. My uncle helped train me, and he's not around either."

"My mother passed away four years ago," Abeke confided. "She was the one who understood me. My father and sister . . . it was different with them. But I do miss them. I know they care for me, as I care for them."

Shane's expression softened. "People here care for you as well, Abeke. We see great potential in you. Those of us with heavy burdens find family where we can. You have your spirit animal. You'll learn to find a lot of solace there. Come."

Uraza followed them out the door. As they passed sailors and soldiers, all eyes furtively strayed to the leopard. Uraza walked with the sinuous grace of a natural predator, and nobody wanted to get too close. Even the bravest gave her plenty of space, while others changed their routes to avoid her entirely. After only four days at sea, Abeke had learned to ignore the attention.

Shane had prepared the hold for use as a training area. Crates, bales, and barrels had been shoved aside to form a long open space. Nobody disturbed them there.

"Have you spent time talking to Uraza?" Shane asked. "Showing fondness for her?"

"Yes," Abeke said.

"Any spirit animal has unusual intelligence," he reminded her. "Yours will have much more than most. She can't talk, but that doesn't mean she won't understand."

"The Great Beasts could speak," Abeke said, passing through a door into the cargo hold. "At least they do in the stories."

"When she was a Great Beast, Uraza was larger than a horse," Shane reminded her.

"Does that mean my Uraza is a cub?" Abeke asked. The powerful leopard sure didn't look like a baby.

"Spirit animals always arrive as adults," Shane said. "Whether Uraza will grow into everything she once was is hard to guess. We'll have to wait and see."

Abeke turned to face Uraza. The leopard gazed at her, violet eyes bright.

"Can you sense her mood?" Shane asked.

"I don't know," Abeke said, staring hard. "Interested, maybe?"

"That seems likely," Shane said. "The more you practice, the better you'll perceive her emotions. That's the first step to borrowing her energy in times of need."

“What about the passive state?” Abeke had always been impressed by Chinwe’s ability to change her wildebeest into a tattoo on her leg.

“That is more up to Uraza than to you,” Shane said. “You must gain her trust. She enters her passive state voluntarily, but she can’t emerge until you release her.”

“You keep your wolverine dormant?” Abeke asked. Once, at her pleading, he had bashfully shown her the hint of a mark high on his chest.

“Most of the time. Renneg is great in a fight, but doesn’t play well with others. When Uraza consents, you’ll get to pick where the mark will go. Many choose their arms or the back of the hand. It’s convenient.”

Abeke had only seen the wolverine once, when they were boarding the ship. It was compact, but looked vicious.

Shane held up a short wooden stick. “We did enough archery yesterday. You’re good, but I didn’t sense Uraza making you any better. I thought today we should try something more strenuous. We’ll pretend this is a knife. All you have to do is stab me.”

He handed Abeke the stick. Abeke went and knelt before Uraza. The leopard lounged on the floor, body curled, head up, long tail swishing languidly. Abeke took in the spotted perfection of her pelt, the black around her vibrant eyes, and the muscular power of her sleek body. How could such a strong, wild creature be her companion? Uraza gazed at her, unblinking.

Abeke gently touched one of her paws. “We’re a team now. Like it or not, we’re both far from home, but at least we have each other. I can tell you don’t love this ship. Neither do I. But it’s just taking us someplace where we can be outside again. I really do like you — you’re quiet, you’re not pushy, and we come from the same place. I want to learn to work together.”

Uraza purred and Abeke fluttered inside. Was it her imagination, or had they begun to connect? It was difficult to be sure.

Abeke turned to face Shane.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he invited.

Abeke shuffled forward, the stick held in front of her. Back home, she had used a spear at times, and had practiced a lot with a bow. She knew little about fighting with a knife.

This didn’t seem like an effective way to confront a larger, more experienced opponent. She would never approach somebody like Shane openly. Her only chance would be to strike from behind, attack out of hiding. With surprise on her side, she’d have much better odds of succeeding.

But this was just practice. She needed to fight according to Shane’s guidelines. Maybe there was something predatory in Uraza that would amplify her efforts.

As Abeke closed in, she tried a quick stab. Shane pivoted away, slapping her wrist. Three more stabs led to three more slaps. She felt no assistance from Uraza. “This is pointless,” Abeke groaned, relaxing her stance.

“You just need —”

She lunged and stabbed hard, hoping to catch him off guard. Shane dodged her attack and seized her wrist. For a moment they struggled. Abeke silently asked Uraza for help. Shane pried the stick from her fingers and touched it to her belly.

“Good try,” he said. “You almost caught me napping.”

“I would never attack you like this in real life,” Abeke said. “I’d sneak up on you.”

Shane nodded. “That would be smarter. And more suited to how a leopard would hunt. Tell you what — I’ll go to the far side of the hold and stand with my back to you. I won’t turn unless I hear something suspicious. Deal?”

Abeke nodded. This new game would play to her more proven abilities.

Shane returned the stick to her and trotted to the far side of the room. Staying low, her pretend knife ready, Abeke crept forward. Step by step she drew nearer.

“Are you moving yet?” Shane asked, facing away from her. “If so, you’re good at it. If not, hurry up — we don’t have all day.”

Abeke fought against a smile. She knew that she was a skilled stalker, and it was nice to hear Shane recognize it. Glancing over her shoulder, she found the leopard watching attentively, her posture more alert than earlier.

The door near Shane burst open and a figure raced toward him. Robed in black, face covered, the attacker held a curved sword ready. Shane ducked a swipe of the sword and grappled with the intruder.

“Run, Abeke!” Shane shouted. “It’s an assassin. Fetch the captain!”

The assassin was bigger than Shane. They wrestled for control of the sword.

Abeke found herself in a low crouch, both unfamiliar and instinctive. A foreign energy blazed into her muscles — every fiber seemed taut and ready to release. Her senses had never felt so keen. She heard the subtle creak of the timbers as the ship rocked gently to the right. She could smell the attacker, a full-grown man, and could distinguish easily between him and Shane. Her vision was enhanced as well, sharpened. No part of her intended to heed Shane’s instruction to run.

Her heart swelled with courage. And she sprang.

Although several paces from Shane, Abeke closed the distance with a single leap. Hurling through the air, she lashed out with one leg and kicked the attacker in the arm. He spun to one knee and his sword flew free, clattering across the plank floor. The man rose to his feet with a vicious uppercut that Abeke evaded almost without thought. He backed off a step or two, one hand up, ready for combat, the other flopping useless at his side. Abeke leaped forward and kicked him in the ribs, her foot crashing through his attempt to block it. The blow landed with enough force to send the assassin flying into the wall. He slumped facedown.

Her instincts screamed to finish the job, but before Abeke could close in, she felt a firm hand on her shoulder. “No, Abeke! No more! It was pretend. He was acting.”

She slipped out of her heightened state and glared at Shane. “Pretend?”

Uraza gave an angry growl, the first Abeke had heard from the leopard.

“I wanted to see how you would perform under pressure,” Shane explained. “It worked, Abeke. That was incredible! Many of the Marked train their entire lives without ever attacking like that.”

Trembling with unreleased energy, Abeke struggled to calm herself. The praise did not escape her notice, but it was hard to embrace it when she felt so stunned. “You got a true response through trickery,” she said. “What you just did to us was a betrayal.”

“I-I’m sorry.” Shane’s smile fell. His earlier excitement gave way to embarrassment. “Really. I was trying to help. It was a training technique. I didn’t know you’d see it this way.”

“Never again,” Abeke said, struggling to calm herself, “or the next time you’re in trouble, we will let the attackers have you.”

“Agreed.” Shane ran a hand through his hair. “You’re right, it was unfair to you and to Uraza. It won’t happen again.”

Abeke felt some of the tension leave her. She nodded toward the fallen assailant. “Is he all right?”

Shane crouched beside him and felt his neck. “He’s unconscious. He’ll live.” He shook his head. “Honestly, I couldn’t imagine you would have been able to take out a trained, full-grown opponent. Let me take care of this. You know the way back to your cabin.”

Abeke turned and found Uraza facing her, having approached silently. Now there was no doubt about the wordless understanding. Abeke held out her arm. With a searing pain and a brief flash, Uraza leaped to become a blaze of black just below her elbow.



SUNSET TOWER

ROLLAN STOOD WITH HIS HEAD TIPPED BACK, USING ONE hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he followed the flight of his falcon. Essix turned in two wide circles, soaring higher than the tallest spire of the Greencloak fortress.

The grass came up to Rollan's knees. Inside Sunset Tower, they had training rooms and spacious courtyards, but he preferred spending time outside the walls. Too many people inside the fortress stared at him, some with doubt, others expectantly. Either reaction unsettled him.

Besides, it was prettier outside. Wilderness had surrounded Concorba at a distance, but he rarely ever saw it. There were a few parks in town, some weedy lots, and the muddy banks of Sipimiss River, but the port city was mostly a place of commerce. He had occasionally seen farmland beyond the town boundaries, but nothing like this — not big hills, not woods, not wild meadows.

An imposing collection of bulky structures enclosed by tall walls of heavy stone, Sunset Tower was not the main Amayan stronghold of the Greencloaks. Rather, it served as the westernmost Greencloak outpost in Northern Amaya. Any farther west led to untamed land controlled mostly by beasts and the Amayan tribes.

Rollan whistled. "Essix, to me!"

The bird continued to glide on lofty breezes.

"Essix, come!"

The falcon drifted through another lazy turn.

"*Get down here!* How hard is it to follow simple instructions? The dimmest kid I know can do that much!"

Bad move. Essix now seemed to be flying farther away from him on purpose. Rollan took a calming breath. He had already learned that shouting angry words would keep the bird in the sky all day. "Please, Essix," he called more gently. "Olvan wants us to learn to work as one."

The falcon tucked her wings and plunged toward him. He held up a protected hand, the large brown glove a gift from Olvan. After arrowing down with blinding speed, Essix spread her wings at the last moment to slow her descent and alighted on his forearm.

“Good girl,” Rollan said, stroking her feathers. “Want to try the passive state? Want to become a mark on my arm?”

Rollan needed no comprehension of bird speech to recognize that her piercing cry meant absolutely not. Rollan gritted his teeth but kept petting her. “Come on, Essix. You don’t want us to look useless when the others get here. Let’s show them what we can do.”

The falcon cocked her head to stare at him with one amber eye. Her feathers ruffled up, but she made no further sound.

“Hey, it doesn’t just reflect on me,” Rollan said. “It makes you look bad too.”

Behind him, a horn sounded. Another horn answered. The Greencloaks at Sunset Tower liked to announce their comings and goings with horns.

“That probably means they’re here,” Rollan said.

Essix hopped to his shoulder.

Yesterday, Olvan had informed Rollan that two of the other three Fallen Beasts were on their way to Sunset Tower with their bonded partners. He explained that after they arrived, Rollan would learn more about what was needed from him. There was always one reason or another to delay a full explanation.

Rollan wondered if the other kids had already taken the Greencloak vows. Olvan said that the vows meant a lifetime commitment to defending Erdas and standing united with the other Greencloaks. In return, Rollan would receive help developing his relationship with Essix, he would be given duty and purpose, and he would never want for food, shelter, or fellowship.

Rollan wasn’t sure he bought it. The return of the Four Fallen was supposed to be a really big deal, but Olvan refused to say what they were actually meant to do. How long did Olvan expect him to wait?

Now that Essix had freed Rollan from a life of poverty, he questioned whether he wanted to tie himself down. He had never enjoyed taking orders. People with authority tended to abuse it. With Essix on his shoulder, who knew what options awaited? It was possible that joining the Greencloaks would prove to be his best opportunity, especially if he had become a target of people like Zerif. Then again, Rollan hadn’t had time to explore all of the alternatives. Instead of turning down Olvan, Rollan asked for time to think it over. That had been three days ago.

As Rollan tromped through the tall grass toward the gate of Sunset Tower, a grim Greencloak astride a mighty horse rode into view. A girl walked beside the Greencloak on one side and a boy on the other. A panda ambled beside the girl, and a large wolf loped beside the boy. They were all headed for Rollan, so he picked up his pace. He knew the panda and wolf must be two of the other Fallen, Jhi and Briggan.

The Greencloak dismounted when he drew near, and Rollan sized him up. He was the sort of stranger Rollan would have avoided on the streets of Concorba.

The boy had blond hair and wore a green cloak, meaning he had taken the vows. Although he was average height for his age, he seemed young. He had a friendly, open face — the sort of face that hadn’t figured out what life was like yet. The girl was striking. She had sparkling eyes and a shy smile that stopped Rollan in his tracks. A faint response in her expression told Rollan that she appreciated his reaction, and he realized that her shy smile was practiced. Judging by her outfit and her features, she came from Zhong, which made sense, given her spirit animal. Rollan had never seen

a real panda. Or a wolf. His only exposure to such creatures came from the Widow Renata, who used to visit the orphanage and read them picture books about the Great Beasts.

“I’m Tarik,” the Greencloak said. “I take it you’re Rollan?”

“I was trying to keep a low profile,” Rollan said. “How could you tell? It was the falcon, wasn’t it?”

“Meilin, Conor, I would like you to meet Rollan,” Tarik said. “He was born and raised here in Amaya. Just as you two summoned Jhi and Briggan, he called Essix.”

The wolf padded forward and the falcon fluttered down to stand before it. The panda moved in close as well, and Essix gave a soft screech. The three animals cautiously investigated each other.

“Do they remember?” Meilin asked, speaking Common. She had a nice voice. It matched her appearance.

“Perhaps,” Tarik said. “It’s difficult to pinpoint how much of their former lives they recall. Much of it might be instinct at this stage.”

“What about the fourth Fallen Beast?” Rollan asked. “Uraza.”

Tarik scowled. “Somebody got to Uraza and her new partner before us, much as Zerif attempted with you. The girl is named Abeke. We don’t know her present location, but we won’t rest until we find her. Lenori believes that she and Uraza are still alive. The challenge will be finding them.”

“Is Lenori how you found us?” Conor asked.

Tarik nodded. “Lenori is the most gifted visionary of all the Greencloaks. Thanks to her unique foresight, we suspected the Four Fallen were returning.”

“Her powers can’t be entirely unique,” Rollan pointed out. “Not if somebody beat you to the girl in Nilo.”

“If Uraza is currently lost,” Meilin said, “then the three of us must represent the Four Fallen. Aren’t we supposed to learn what’s going on, now that we’re together?”

“That information is Olvan’s to share,” Tarik told her. “You already know that we want you to join the Greencloaks and help us preserve Erdas.”

“From the Devourer?” Rollan asked, not hiding his skepticism.

Tarik seemed momentarily startled by this question. “Who mentioned the Devourer?”

“This guy I met,” Rollan said. “He was riding a moose.”

“We’re still not positive who we’re up against. If it isn’t the Devourer himself, it’s somebody very much like him. It shouldn’t be long before Olvan explains why we need your help. For the moment, you three should seize this chance to get better acquainted. You’ll see a lot of each other in the coming days. I’ll ride ahead to announce our arrival.”

“Get ready to be stared at,” Rollan warned the others as Tarik rode away. “It’s all people have done since I arrived. At first I worried I had food on my face.”

“People tend to stare at newcomers,” Meilin said. “Especially important ones.”

“I guess our animals make us important,” Conor said, sounding uncertain whether he believed it.

The conversation died out. Conor looked uneasy.

Rollan sized up the other two and their animals. Briggan was the most impressive beast. Rollan knew some people back in Concorba he would love to scare with a wolf like that. The panda just sat pawing at the grass. Conor seemed shy. Meilin acted uninterested.

“Judging by your clothes, I take it you’re rich,” Rollan said to her.

“Wealth is relative,” she replied with a cold look. “The emperor has much more treasure than my father.”

Rollan chuckled. “If the Zhongese emperor is your example of someone richer than you, you have to be loaded.”

“My father is a general and there are also successful merchants in my bloodline.”

“Yep, rich,” Rollan said. “What about you, Conor? Do you have a family or a bloodline?”

Conor blushed a little, glancing at Meilin. “A family. We have bloodlines, I guess, but we don’t use that word. We’re shepherds. I got stuck as a servant for a time, but I always preferred the outdoors.”

“And I’m an orphan,” Rollan said bluntly. “I’m only here because Essix was my ticket out of jail.”

“Jail!” Conor exclaimed. “What did you do?”

Rollan checked to make sure they were both listening closely, then leaned in. “Actually, I was innocent — not that I had any proof. I was arrested for stealing medicine from an apothecary.”

“Were you sick?” Conor asked.

“A friend had a bad fever. But I didn’t swipe the medicine. Another friend did. I was around when it happened, so they assumed I was in on it.”

“Which is the lie?” Meilin asked. “That you were in jail, or that you were there for stealing medicine?”

Rollan shrugged. “You got me. I’m actually Olvan’s son. He’s having me spy on you.”

Meilin didn’t challenge him further, but Rollan could tell she didn’t trust him. Maybe she wasn’t completely stupid. It was a pretty far-fetched story. Plus she hadn’t accepted a green cloak yet.

Conor peered over his shoulder at Sunset Tower. “What do you think they want us to do?”

“Maybe you should have asked before you put on the cloak,” Rollan suggested.

“I expect they’ll want us as soldiers,” Meilin said. “Leaders, probably. The war has already begun.”

“I bet they want us as mascots,” Rollan said. “They’ll probably add me to the Amayan flag.”

Conor laughed, blushing slightly. “Can you imagine? As if all the attention didn’t make me uncomfortable enough.”

“This is a poor hour for humor,” Meilin snapped, her eyes blazing. “Zhong is under heavy attack. The Greencloaks smuggled me away as my father fought to defend our city. I still haven’t heard whether he lived or died! Whatever they have planned for us better be good.”

Rollan eyed her warily. “I’m not sure how helpful I’ll be,” Rollan said. “Do you two have any tips about the animals? I can hardly get Essix to do anything.”

“I’ve been trying with Briggan,” Conor said, crouching to pet his wolf. “He can be stubborn. The more we’ve gotten to know each other, the better it’s become. Tarik told me that eventually we can get powers from them.”

Rollan glanced at Meilin and her panda. “What’s your power going to be? Cuddling?”

Meilin’s face was pure ice. For a moment her lips trembled, but after that the anger only touched her eyes. She held out her arm and in a flash Jhi became a design on the back of her hand. She turned and stormed away.

“See,” Rollan called. “Like that! How did you figure that out?”

“Too late,” Conor said quietly. “I haven’t known Meilin long, but I can tell she has a temper.”

“Can you do that too?” Rollan asked. “The tattoo thing?”

“Not yet,” Conor said.

Rollan stroked Essix. “At least we’re not the only slow learners.”



Sunset Tower was dark and still as Rollan crept out of his room. He paused, listening, ready with answers if he was challenged by a watchman: He couldn’t sleep; he needed a snack.

But no challenge came.

Peering back into his room, Rollan saw Essix roosting near the window, head tucked in sleep. He eased the door closed. The open window would allow the falcon to catch up with him. The bird might not approve of his decision, which was why he hadn’t tried to explain, but she would follow. They were linked now.

Along the hallway, small oil lamps trimmed to a slow burn provided dim light. Moving down the corridor, Rollan felt the alert guilt of a trespasser. The late hour meant he might not encounter anyone, but if he did, he knew it would look extra suspicious. The farther he deviated from the path to the kitchen, the more conspicuous he felt. How could he answer why he was heading for the castle gate fully dressed with a satchel? Why did he need a snack when his satchel was crammed with stolen food? His responses sounded so unlikely: He couldn’t relax; he felt confined; he needed some fresh air. Anyone with half a brain would guess the truth.

He was running away.

The thought produced a stab of remorse, which he tried to shrug off. Had he ever asked to come here? Olvan had promised to protect him from Zerif, but who would protect him from Olvan? Rollan knew that, in theory, he was a guest of the Greencloaks, but he was starting to feel more like a prisoner. Sure, it was mostly smiles and politeness now. But the Greencloaks’ expectations were his chains. How long would the friendliness last if he quit following orders? How long would it last if they caught him tonight?

He and the others had returned to the fortress earlier to — once again — the weight of the promised stares. The Greencloaks helped Conor and Meilin get settled, but no additional information was forthcoming. Rollan had asked more questions, but — once again — they were deflected. That evening, Rollan decided he had waited for specifics long enough. The more time he stayed, the clearer it became that the Greencloaks would settle for nothing less than a lifelong commitment, so they could benefit from his falcon. With Conor and Meilin here, the pressure on him would only increase. Each day he stayed implied that he meant to commit. If he wanted to get away, the time to act was now.

Besides the big gate, Rollan had seen three minor gates in the outer wall. All were heavily reinforced and disguised from the outside. As far as he could tell, they only opened from within. Over the past week he had tried all of them. He knew which one he would use tonight.

Rollan heard the tones of a distant conversation up ahead and froze. He couldn’t distinguish words, but the blurry murmuring had no urgency to it. Apparently, guards were covering the main door to the courtyard, chatting to pass the time. That was no obstacle. Too many doors led from the main building out to the courtyard for them all to be guarded. There was no war here in Amaya, and people had to sleep.

Stepping lightly but swiftly, Rollan advanced along a narrow corridor toward another door that would lead outside. From up ahead a voice floated his way. “Come on, Briggan! You don’t want

food; you don't want to go outside — can't this wait until morning?"

It was Conor! What was he doing up? Rollan slipped down a side corridor, unsure where it led. He went around a corner and paused to listen. He could barely hear the wolf, but Conor was making no effort to walk quietly. They were coming his way!

Moving faster, Rollan took a couple other turns before the hall ended at a locked door. Breathing softly, he listened as Conor and the wolf got nearer and nearer. Surely they would turn a different direction! Why would they come down a dead end?

Unless the wolf was tracking him.

Rollan folded his arms and leaned against the wall, hoping he could sell the idea that he was just hanging around the castle. At this hour, it didn't seem very believable, but Conor didn't give the impression that he was a genius.

Conor came into view with Briggan. The wolf stopped, staring at Rollan. Looking ruffled and tired, Conor squinted. "Rollan? What are you doing here?"

"Couldn't sleep," Rollan said. "I was exploring. Why are you up so late?"

Conor yawned and stretched. "I was trying to sleep, but Briggan kept pawing the door."

Rollan looked at the wolf. It sat back, mouth open, tongue dangling.

Conor wrinkled his nose. "Why hang out here? Are you up to something?"

"Fine," Rollan said, as if about to reluctantly admit the truth. "Essix went out flying but hasn't returned. I want to make sure she's all right."

"So you came here. To a dead end," Conor clarified.

"I lost my way."

"So you stood against a door."

Rollan thought fast. Maybe Conor wasn't so dim, after all. "I heard you coming and got embarrassed. I didn't want to seem lost. I really am concerned about Essix."

Conor frowned. "If you're worried, we should tell Olvan. I'm sure he has lots of people who can help us find Essix."

Rollan hesitated. It had been a feeble excuse, but better than pretending he thought the kitchen was on this side of the castle. "You're right. Why don't you and Briggan go tell Olvan? I want to get started on my own just in case."

Conor glanced at the satchel. "What's in the bag?"

"Falcon food. You know . . . as bait."

Conor gave him a look. "Big bag for falcon food."

Rollan sighed and gave up. "Look, don't get Olvan. Essix is fine. I'm just . . . thinking about a change of scenery."

"You're running away?" Conor blurted incredulously. Briggan cocked his head.

"I'm escaping," Rollan clarified.

"You're not a prisoner," Conor said.

"I'm not so sure!" Rollan replied. "You think they'd let me go? Just wander off with Essix?"

Conor paused. "Yeah, if you insisted."

"How would you know? You signed up as soon as they dangled a cloak in front of you."

Conor shifted. "I signed up after I learned that I had summoned Briggan," he replied defensively. "I never asked for my own Great Beast, but it happened, and now the Greencloaks need my help to protect the world."

“From what?” Rollan scoffed. “They still haven’t explained! Not really. We hear there’s a war in Zhong. They whisper about the Devourer. People I’ve never met look at me hopefully, and I have no idea what they expect. Even if my falcon really is the same Essix from the old stories, what are we supposed to do about a war? In the stories Essix was huge and could talk. This Essix hardly seems to like me!”

“I wonder why,” Conor said. Briggan gave his head a quick shake. Was the wolf laughing at them?

“Watch it, sheep boy.” Rollan bristled. “You might like being herded, but that isn’t my style.”

“Yeah, well, at least I don’t run away the second I get scared,” Conor replied with sputtering anger. “You think this isn’t hard for me? You think I don’t have doubts too? You think I want to be stuck in some castle across the sea from my home? Go ahead and call me sheep boy any time you want. Herding sheep takes a lot more courage and know-how than sneaking away in the night!”

Rollan found himself temporarily at a loss for words. If Conor was working with the Greencloaks in spite of his own doubts, because he thought it was the right thing to do, well, there wasn’t much fault to find in that. Not that he had to admit it.

“I just need some space,” Rollan said softly, choosing to fight honesty with honesty. “How am I supposed to think this through while surrounded by Greencloaks? Every meal I eat, every hand I shake, feels like pressure to join them. How am I supposed to make my own choice? The Greencloaks probably aren’t bad folks. But I’m not sure their interest in me goes one inch beyond the falcon. That means they’re using me and that makes me cautious.”

“I hear you,” Conor said. “Nobody paid much mind to me either, until Briggan came along. Then I was suddenly the center of attention.”

“Doesn’t that make you question their motives?”

Conor gave a little nod and Briggan stared expectantly at him. “Maybe. But I’m convinced that they’re trying to defend Erdas. They need Briggan, so they need me too. Besides, Briggan seems to trust them.”

The wolf wagged his tail and began to pace.

Rollan glanced at the corridor behind Conor. “Whatever I choose, I guess I blew my escape tonight. You going to turn me in?”

“You haven’t done anything,” Conor replied, meeting Rollan’s eyes steadily.

Rollan lowered his head and rubbed his eyebrows with his knuckles. “I guess I could wait around to hear the specifics.”

“You could probably make a better choice that way,” Conor pointed out.

“Meanwhile, they’ll have the chance to keep reeling me in,” Rollan said. “I won’t let them force me into this. I don’t care if it gets awkward. I don’t even care if they lock me up. Actually, if they lock me up, I’ll know I made the right call.”

Conor extended his arms and opened his mouth in a jaw-cracking yawn. “I’m glad you might stick around for now. I’d hate to be left alone with Meilin.”

Rollan smirked. “Does she scare you?”

Conor shrugged. “I’ve got two brothers. I don’t know the first thing about girls.”

“I hear they like flowers.”

“If you say so.” Conor turned and patted the side of his leg. “Come on, Briggan, let’s get back to bed. Good night, Rollan.”

“Night.” He watched until Conor walked out of sight. Then Rollan reconsidered his options. He supposed he could still make his escape. But the mood had left him.

Rollan started back toward his room. His secret departure may have been compromised, but all was not lost. He could always steal away some other night.



ON HER WAY TO THE TRAINING ROOM, ALMOST EVERY single person Meilin passed stared at her. Some covertly, some unashamedly gawking. Conversations stopped in mid-sentence when she came into view, and once she passed, whispers followed her. The few who didn't stare sent her careful glances or self-conscious waves and nods, which were almost more telling. Rollan was right. The Greencloaks had heavy expectations of her.

Meilin entered the wide and airy room and found Conor waiting with his wolf. The training area looked almost too large — much bigger than the practice space she had used with the masters back home. She guessed the vaulted ceiling was meant for Greencloaks with winged beasts.

“Glad to see you,” Conor said, rubbing his arm self-consciously. “I was starting to worry I'd come to the wrong place.”

“I got a message with my breakfast,” Meilin said. “They asked me to report here with Jhi as soon as I finished.”

Conor nodded. “Me too. I could hardly eat after the note. I can't, um, I don't know my letters very well, so I had to get help to read it.” Conor reddened. “Did it sound like a test to you?”

“Some kind of assessment.”

Conor glanced at Briggan, then back at Meilin. “I guess Jhi is on your hand?”

“She seems to prefer it much of the time.”

Conor nodded, then seemed very aware that he had run out of things to say. Crouching, he stroked Briggan. Meilin watched him avoid her gaze. He was a simple boy, baseborn, uneducated, yet in one important way he was her peer — he had summoned one of the Four Fallen. Why him? Could it be random chance? If so, why her? Would random chance select someone as prepared for leadership as herself?

Rollan entered the room, the falcon on his shoulder. “Am I late?”

Conor looked up, relief stamped on his face. “Glad you're here.”

Some quiet understanding passed between them. What had she missed? Had they discussed her in private? With Zhong under attack, she didn't want to spend any time worrying about such trivial things

— but she couldn't help it, and that annoyed her.

“Nobody else has shown up yet?” Rollan asked.

“Not yet,” Conor said.

Rollan scanned the weapons held in racks against the walls: swords, scimitars, knives, spears, polearms, axes, staves, and clubs. “Are we going to fight to the death?”

“Nothing that exciting,” Tarik said, entering the room with two other men and a woman. All three wore green cloaks and were new to Meilin. They paid rapt attention to Essix and Briggan. “We evaluate all new recruits to gauge their abilities.”

Rollan looked at the other Greencloaks. “Who are your friends?”

“Observers,” Tarik answered calmly. “They'll assist you as needed. Pay them little mind. I just want to put each of you through a few exercises.”

“Finally,” Rollan grumbled, “somebody to stare at us.”

The two men crossed to Conor and Rollan. The woman approached Meilin. She was thick but not flabby, and had a no-nonsense look about her.

“Meilin, could you produce Jhi?” Tarik asked.

Meilin focused her attention on the simple tattoo on the back of her hand. When her interest was elsewhere, she hardly noticed the mark. But now she could perceive warmth beneath the image, a vague presence. She mentally called to Jhi, imagined a door opening, and then with a flash the tattoo vanished and Jhi appeared.

“Well done,” Tarik complimented. “Some who have newly learned to use the passive state struggle to release their animals. You did that swiftly, which is important. While passive, your spirit animal cannot aid you.”

Meilin gave a nod and a modest smile. Although accustomed to praise, she was not entirely immune to its effects. She noticed the boys, particularly Rollan, watching her enviously. Keeping her eyes on Tarik, she pretended not to care.

“Please allow your escorts to blindfold you,” Tarik instructed. “We're going to test your awareness of your spirit animals without the aid of sight.”

Meilin held still as the woman placed a blindfold over her eyes.

“Do you guys fight a lot with your eyes closed?” Rollan asked.

Meilin had been thinking the same thing, but she never would have said it.

“This will simulate a situation where your spirit animal is out of view,” Tarik explained patiently, as if the question had not been meant to rattle him. “Relax and follow instructions.”

A hand took Meilin by the elbow and led her several paces. With great care, she retained a sense of where she stood in the room. She waited for perhaps a minute.

“The animals have all changed position,” Tarik announced. “I now challenge each of you to point out the location of your animal. I respectfully ask the animals to keep silent.”

Meilin strained her senses but could neither hear nor smell anything. She thought about the vague presence she could feel beneath the tattoo when Jhi was in her dormant state, and tried to sense a similar presence around her. Nothing.

“Good, Conor. Very close,” Tarik said.

Meilin kept her face composed but felt disappointed. Could Conor have a stronger connection to his spirit animal than she had to hers? He couldn't even use the passive state! Maybe he had made a lucky guess.

“I’m sorry, Rollan, you’re way off,” Tarik said. “But good job, Conor. Briggan is moving and you’re tracking him well.”

Meilin silently ordered Jhi to make herself known. From the start, Jhi had obeyed her requests, but Meilin still felt nothing.

“Meilin,” Tarik said, “if you’re unsure, rely on your instincts.”

She didn’t want to point randomly, but maybe Tarik was giving her a hint. Maybe her awareness of her creature was something felt only at an instinctive level. That might explain why Conor was good at it — she doubted his problem would be too much thought.

Following a whim, Meilin extended a finger to the right.

“Not even close, Meilin,” Tarik said, with a touch of humor in his tone.

Meilin pointed to the left.

“Better, but still far off,” Tarik reported.

Meilin had to work to keep her expression neutral. What sort of absurd contest was this? She silently *demand*ed for Jhi to reveal herself. Once again, she sensed nothing.

“Not bad, Rollan,” Tarik said. “Not good, but you’re doing too well for it to only be chance. Conor, you’re a natural at this.”

Meilin tried not to feel flustered. She had never attempted to sense Jhi like this. Had the boys practiced? Probably.

“Care to try one more time, Meilin?” Tarik asked.

She pulled off her blindfold. “I feel nothing.” She looked to where Jhi strolled near one wall of the training area, led by an escort.

“It’s not unusual,” Tarik told her.

Meilin watched Conor’s finger follow Briggan, staying on the animal even when the wolf reversed direction. Essix flew around overhead. Rollan seemed to be able to identify which half of the room the bird was in, but not much else.

“How can I improve?” Meilin asked.

“You can already call Jhi to her passive state,” Tarik acknowledged, “so earning the trust of your beast does not seem to be the problem. I imagine it will just take time to strengthen your connection. Part of that includes your receptiveness to her.”

Meilin nodded. Jhi always obeyed her orders, so what had gone wrong? Perhaps Tarik was right. Perhaps the panda was trying. Meilin frowned. Maybe she was the one unable to receive the cues. Aside from Jhi’s obedience, they weren’t very close. What would it take? Deep affection? Mutual understanding? It was hard to respect such a docile, slow animal. But Jhi was her spirit animal. There would be no other. Meilin knew she had to make it work.

“You may remove your blindfolds,” Tarik invited.

Meilin glanced at the weapons on the walls. The wooden swords were obviously practice gear. Many of the arms looked real, though some of them could be blunted. With or without help from Jhi, Meilin expected she could dominate either of the boys in just about any form of combat. Such a demonstration would be satisfying, but would it be wise? Her father had always told her to keep her abilities private so she could surprise adversaries in times of need.

“Next we’ll try a physical exercise,” Tarik announced. “All three of you will go to the far wall.” He indicated the wall he meant. “You’ll run across the room and touch this other wall as high as you

can, then run back and strike the suspended bag with all your might. Ask your animals to enhance your efforts in any way they can.”

Meilin surveyed the canvas bag hanging from a beam near the far wall. Suspended by a chain, the bulging sack was taller than her and looked heavy.

“Will we do it at the same time?” Meilin asked.

“Yes,” Tarik said. “The first to reach the bag will strike it first, and so forth. We’ll evaluate your speed, the height of your leap, and the force with which you hit the bag. Go ahead and take a moment with your animals.”

Meilin approached Jhi. The panda sat on her hind legs and watched her serenely. Jhi licked one of her paws. The relaxed attitude did little to boost Meilin’s confidence.

“Can you help me with this?” Meilin asked. “Can you give me extra speed? Extra energy? I’ve never felt that from you. This might be a good time to start.”

The panda cocked her head as if mildly perplexed.

“Look,” Meilin whispered harshly. “Every minute we are stuck here in training is another minute that my father and his army have to struggle without us. I know you have power — you’re a Great Beast. So I need you to help me, because every delay helps our enemy. Do you understand? We’re not playing a game here. We are at war.”

Did Meilin sense a degree of understanding in that unblinking silver gaze? Or was it imagined?

The boys were heading to the wall, so Meilin trotted to join them. Her body was in good condition. Even though it had been a few weeks since a formal training session with the masters, she had engaged in regular routines while traveling to maintain her reflexes and endurance. The boys were taller, but she wasn’t slow, and she knew how to deliver vicious blows.

Briggan paced along one of the side walls, watching the three with a predator’s intensity. Essix flew up to roost on the beam above the suspended bag. Jhi sat where Meilin had left her, looking on silently.

Rollan smirked at her. “Did you have to run much in your palace?”

“I didn’t live in a palace,” Meilin replied. It was true, although she realized her home would probably look like a palace to Rollan or Conor. Assuming it still stood.

“I run fine,” Conor volunteered. “I haven’t done it much lately. How about you, Rollan?”

“Orphans have to run well,” he replied. “A slow orphan ends up in jail.”

“Weren’t you just in jail?” Meilin asked innocently.

“Are you ready?” Tarik called.

One Greencloak observer stood by them against the starting wall. Another was positioned by the wall where they would jump. And the third waited near the hanging sack. All three kids touched the wall behind them.

“Get ready,” Tarik said. “And . . . go!”

Meilin pushed off and ran as fast as she could. In her mind, she asked Jhi for greater speed, feeling somewhat ridiculous. It was hard to imagine extra speed coming from the sluggish panda. With swift spirit animals, Conor and Rollan had more cause for faith.

Meilin ran well, but as she approached the wall for the jump, Rollan was a few paces ahead, and Conor was about even with her. The dash felt like nothing beyond a regular sprint.

Meilin considered the jump. If the boys tried to leap high, it might slow their turn. If she focused instead on turning around quickly, she might gain ground and perhaps make it first to the hanging bag.

Then again, if the jump counted for a third of her score, a weak jump might guarantee last place even if she hit the bag hard.

Ahead of her, Rollan slowed a little and jumped, slapping the wall as high as he could. It was a respectable jump, but nothing extraordinary. Meilin decided to go for it.

As she leaped, Meilin felt a strange surge of energy, and kicked off the wall to increase the height of her jump. Conor sprang beside her, and although he was taller, she slapped the wall higher.

After landing she turned and ran hard. Conor was behind her now. Rollan was a good four paces ahead and going strong.

A piercing howl cut through the room. Briggan. Though Meilin tried to ignore the noise, goose bumps rose on her arm.

Conor streaked past Meilin and passed Rollan as well. He reached the bag several steps ahead of Rollan, jumped, and slammed into it with his shoulder. He rebounded roughly, spinning to the floor, and the bag only jounced a little.

Meilin realized she needed to take care how she hit the bag. It was clearly heavy. She would treat it like she was striking a wall.

Rollan threw a punch at the bag as he ran by. The bag absorbed the impact as if it were nothing. At least Conor had moved it.

Begging for energy from Jhi, Meilin left the ground and kicked with both legs. The massive bag swayed with the impact, but not a lot. She broke her fall with her hands and rose to her feet, panting.

“Are you all right, Conor?” Tarik asked.

He rose gingerly, rubbing his shoulder. “I’m okay.”

“You might have warned us it was full of rocks,” Rollan complained, massaging his wrist.

“Sand,” Tarik clarified. “Thoughts?”

“Not much beyond their natural talents,” the female Greencloak said.

“Except toward the end of Conor’s run,” one of the other Greencloaks pointed out.

“How did that feel?” Tarik asked.

“When Briggan howled?” Conor asked. “I don’t know — it was like I had the wind at my back. I felt more aggressive. I wasn’t planning to ram the sack, but it felt right.” He grimaced. “Until I hit it.”

The Greencloak near the jumping wall spoke up. “Meilin may have had a little boost when she jumped.”

“Did you feel it, Meilin?” Tarik asked.

“Maybe a little,” she replied. “To be honest, I mostly felt on my own.”

“If the panda had helped, she would have gone slower,” Rollan joked.

“You certainly punched like a bird,” Meilin shot back. “It was hard as a feather.”

“Whoa,” Rollan said, raising both hands. “Better not pick on the panda.”

“No squabbling,” Tarik ordered. “Your relationships with your animals are individual in nature. This isn’t a contest. I mainly wanted to make each of you more aware of your spirit animal and how you might learn to help one another.”

Meilin fought a stab of anger. The training exercises had only emphasized the worthlessness of her relationship with Jhi. If this was all the panda had to offer, she had made a huge mistake leaving Zhong. How could she have abandoned her father and her homeland for this?

“Are we done?” Conor asked.

Tarik exchanged nods with the other Greencloaks. “We’ve seen enough for now.”

“What does it look like when you hit the bag?” Rollan challenged.

Tarik glanced at the other Greencloaks, then at the kids. “You’d like a demonstration?”

Meilin sighed softly. The last thing she wanted after her lackluster showing was to watch an expert in action. But the boys encouraged him.

With a flash, a sleek otter appeared.

Rollan choked back a laugh. “Your spirit animal is an otter?”

“Lumeo is more clown than beast,” Tarik explained.

The otter rolled into a series of acrobatics, its long body twisting and twirling like the tail of a kite. Conor clapped.

“All right,” Tarik told his beast indulgently. “We all know you’re the biggest showoff here. Do you mind lending me some help for a moment?”

The otter jolted upright to attention and then watched as Tarik walked to the wall where the others had started their race. Meilin gasped when he started running. Nobody could accelerate so quickly! When he reached the wall, he kicked against it three times, gaining altitude with each step, before slapping a spot more than twice as high as anyone else had reached. As he fell, Tarik pushed off from the wall, did a backflip, and landed running. When he reached the hanging bag, his punch made it leap and quake. Then he turned away from the swinging bag.

“Amazing!” Conor said.

Rollan clapped as well, and gave a whistle.

Meilin decided she had better offer some applause or she would look like a poor sport. The display really had been quite impressive. She would never have guessed that the tall warrior could move with such speed and agility.

Tarik extended a hand to his otter. “Lumeo deserves the accolades. Without him, I could not have done any of that. We’re a team, just as you are with your animals. Explore that connection, and you will be rewarded.”

“Impressive,” Meilin conceded. “But I feel like we’re getting distracted. Zhong is under attack. People are dying. Who knows how many cities have fallen by now? I’ve come a long way in good faith, but I’m starting to wonder how my presence in Amaya is helping the war in Zhong. When will we learn what you Greencloaks want from us? I didn’t cross Erdas to run races and kick sacks of sand.”

“Soon,” Tarik promised. “Olvan is finalizing his plans. You three have no idea how vital you are. We have to use you correctly. And you must try your best to be ready.”

Tarik and the other Greencloaks departed. Meilin avoided further conversation with Conor and Rollan by heading directly to Jhi, who had rolled over onto her back, legs splayed out ridiculously.

“Let’s go back to our room,” she told the panda.

Jhi looked up expectantly.

Meilin raised her hand. “You want a lift? Guess what? As a reward for all your help, you get to walk today.”

Meilin started toward her room, not caring whether the panda followed or not.



THE ISLAND

BY THE GLOW OF A LARGE YELLOW MOON, ABEKE CREPT along the rooftop behind Uraza, breathing softly. From her high vantage, she could see the lagoon where their ship had docked. The warm, humid air carried the rich smell of jungle foliage, mingled with the salty tang of the sea.

According to Shane, they were on an island in the Gulf of Amaya, on the far side of the ocean from Nilo. She had secretly explored part of it on two previous outings, confirming that it was at least a peninsula. Since she had been asleep when the ship made port, tonight she would see for herself that she was truly on an island. Not that she doubted Shane — it just gave her something to do. She had never been on an island before.

Uraza leaped down from the roof to the top of a wall. It was not a serious drop, but the landing was barely three handspans wide. As Abeke paused, Uraza looked back at her, eyes gleaming in the moonlight. Abeke felt a steadying surge of ability. The tension departed from her muscles, leaving her relaxed and limber. Her balance steadied, and she concentrated on the night sounds of the island — creatures scurrying, the call of a bird, and a hushed conversation below, perhaps on a balcony, perhaps on the ground. Her vision sharpened in the low light, and she breathed the layered scents in the air.

Abeke landed lightly on the wall, then hurried to where it joined the outer wall of the complex. After climbing a little, she dangled from the wall and dropped to the sandy ground.

Nobody had seen her escape — not that it mattered. If she got caught, the only penalty would be the sting of failure. She was hungry for practice. Her training with Shane was useful but artificial. These nighttime excursions with Uraza felt much more authentic.

Abeke followed Uraza into a ferny shadow world of tall trees with enormous leaves. She was not used to such lush vegetation, to vines and creepers, or to so many trees crowded together, but supposed the wetness in the air explained why plants thrived here. Since her arrival, it had already rained twice — short, hard downfalls that came on with little warning and ended just as swiftly. Abeke wished that she could send some of the abundant water to her village.

The stronghold where they were staying disappeared behind them. Situated just inland from the sheltered inlet where the whale-towed ships were anchored, the walled outpost contained the only buildings she had found on the island.

“Uraza, this way,” Abeke said, pointing. The leopard had been veering toward the highlands they had already explored. “I want to see the far side of the island.”

The big cat moved off in the desired direction. The rustling of shrubs and the cries of birds did little to disturb Abeke. She would never have ventured into this jungle alone at night, but with Uraza at her side, she felt invincible.

They prowled unhurriedly, whispering through the foliage like ghosts. Falling into an almost trancelike state, Abeke mimicked Uraza, pausing when she paused, advancing when she advanced. Through their bond, Abeke studied the leopard’s techniques while borrowing her sharper senses and innate stealth.

After some time, they emerged from the trees to climb a long slope that grew steeper as they followed it. The bushes were smaller here, affording Abeke a long view of the dark forest behind her, the lights of the little outpost reduced to orange sparks near the lagoon.

From the bare ridgetop, Abeke got her first view of the farthest side of the island. The opposite slope descended sharply to the sea. By the moonlight, she could discern the coastline, partly shielded from the open water by long sandbars. There was no other land in sight. Her eyes were drawn to a pale beach in a certain cove, due to the presence of two bonfires. To blaze so brightly at this distance, the fires had to be an impressive size. Figures moved on the beach, dark specks occasionally illuminated by the firelight.

“Look down there,” Abeke said. “Who could that be?”

Crouching low, Uraza watched warily beside her.

Abeke squinted, straining her sight. “Hard to tell from up here. They’re a long way from the outpost. Could it be pirates? Shane said all ships have to watch out for pirates lately.”

Uraza remained still beside her.

Abeke wondered if Shane’s people knew they were sharing the island. Could the figures on the beach pose a threat? It seemed unlikely. There were dozens of people at the sturdy outpost, many of them armed soldiers and most with spirit animals. Three big ships waited in the lagoon. Shane had mentioned others coming soon, distinguished visitors. Could it be them on the beach? Wouldn’t visitors come directly to the outpost?

“I don’t like this,” Abeke murmured. “I don’t want to risk anybody sneaking up on Shane and his people. Think we could get close without being spotted?”

In reply, Uraza flicked her tail and started down the slope toward the cove. Abeke followed.

Soon they passed beneath trees again. Abeke took extra care to move silently. This was no longer a game. The people on the beach could be dangerous.

A balmy breeze ruffled the surrounding leaves, bringing the faint smell of smoke. Abeke welcomed the breeze — it would further disguise any sounds they made.

After a considerable hike, the smoke grew stronger and Abeke could hear distant conversations. Then, from up ahead, a shriek pierced the night. A second shriek came, less strident, followed by a third. Abeke held her breath, kneeling down beside Uraza. The cries stopped. The shrieks had not sounded human, nor did they match any animal she could think of, but they had sounded desperate.

Uraza started forward again. They advanced more cautiously than ever, a little at a time, finally coming within sight of the beach. Together, Abeke and Uraza crept as close as they dared, gazing out from the last of the dense foliage beneath the shadows of the trees.

The twin bonfires burned wide and tall, like small huts accidentally set ablaze. By the rippling light, Abeke saw six large cages, and perhaps ten men. Four of the cages contained monstrous beasts: one was feathery, some gargantuan bird of prey; another had quills like a porcupine but was nearly the size of a buffalo; a third held a huge coiled snake, probably some kind of constrictor; and the fourth housed what appeared to be a muscular rat big enough to bring down an antelope.

An ordinary dog paced inside one of the other cages, looking small and scared compared to the neighboring monstrosities. The sixth cage stood empty.

A man in a hooded cloak approached the empty cage with a rat in his hand. The rodent was big, but nothing like the unnatural rat nearby. "Let's double the amount on this one and check for differences," he said.

"Large or small, a dose is a dose," a bald man protested.

"We have plenty," the hooded man countered. "We lost the parrot, so we have an extra cage. Let's find out firsthand."

Abeke had to strain, but she felt sure that she heard the words correctly. The hooded man produced a waterskin and upended it over the mouth of the rat in his other hand. The rat squirmed, tail whipping from side to side.

"That's enough," one of the other men growled.

"Cage it," another man demanded.

"Not yet," the hooded man said, capping the waterskin. "If I'm too hasty, it will run out between the bars." He held out the rat for the other men to see. It wriggled in his grasp, seeming to swell. It began squirming harder, screeching in pain.

The hooded man turned and stuffed the rat between the bars of the empty cage. The rodent writhed on the cage floor, new flesh bursting out beneath its fur. It let out a tortured shriek that Abeke recognized. It squealed one more time, then lunged against the bars, its enlarged body bloated with muscle. The rat tested the bars several times, rocking the cage and kicking up sand before settling down.

Abeke could hardly trust her eyes. What would Shane think when she told him about this? Would he believe her? She glanced over at Uraza. "You're my only witness," she whispered. "You see this, don't you? It isn't natural. What did they give it?"

Uraza only looked her way for an instant, then returned her attention to the beach.

"What did I tell you?" the bald man said. "A dose is a dose. The amount don't matter."

"This one is a little larger," the hooded man said. "And if you ask me, the transformation took less time."

"Waste of effort. Let's finish this."

"This last one should be simplest," the hooded man said. "Admiral is well-trained. He may even remain so after the Bile."

"I'll believe it when I see it," the bald man said.

The hooded man held up his waterskin. "Get ready to eat your words." He walked over to the cage with the dog inside. "Sit, Admiral."

The dog sat.

“Speak.”

The dog barked and wagged its tail.

The hooded man uncapped the waterskin and held it between the bars. “Come.”

The dog came forward and the man poured fluid into its mouth. Abeke could see some splashing free. Then he backed away.

Several other men stepped closer to the cage, warily clutching long spears. One held a bow with an arrow set to the string.

Abeke didn't want to watch, but couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight of the dog convulsing and enlarging. It didn't cry out like the rat, but it whined softly. As the dog changed, its muscles pulled taut, bulging grotesquely. Its eyes grew fierce and wide, and foam began frothing from the corners of its mouth. The dog let out a low growl before launching itself against the side of the cage, very nearly toppling it over onto its side.

“Sit, Admiral,” the hooded man called from a distance.

The monstrous dog shifted into a sitting position.

“Speak.”

The beefy dog let out a powerful bark that resonated through the jungle, sending birds flying from the trees.

“Good boy, Admiral,” the hooded man called. “Good boy.”

“All right, I'm impressed,” the bald man admitted. “But I wouldn't let it out without a leash.”

Some of the other men chuckled. Most still held their weapons cautiously.

A swirling breeze stirred the air.

Suddenly the dog whipped its head toward the jungle, staring directly at Abeke. It let out a rumbling growl. Some of the men glanced in the direction the dog was staring. Abeke resisted the urge to immediately retreat. If she moved while their eyes were on her, she would give herself away for sure. She had to rely on the leaves and the shadows.

The dog's growl built into a series of vicious barks.

“What is it, Admiral?” the hooded man called, following the animal's gaze.

The huge dog barked more fiercely.

“No, no, no,” Abeke whispered.

The dog began to savagely ram the sides of the cage. The men were shouting to each other, but Abeke couldn't make out their words under the noise. Barking and thrashing, the dog went into a frenzy. The cage shuddered violently. The dog began bashing the roof, and the wood began to crack and splinter.

Abeke felt sharp teeth on her arm. Uraza was gently biting her. Once Abeke noticed her, the leopard slunk back deeper into the trees. Abeke joined her retreat.

The wild clamor continued behind her, and then there was a violent crack. Glancing over her shoulder, Abeke saw the enormous hound crash through the roof of the cage, the bars falling away in all directions. Ignoring the men, some of whom made halfhearted jabs with their spears, the monstrous dog raced straight toward Abeke, spewing sand with each massive stride.

Uraza broke into a run with Abeke sprinting beside her. All pretense at stealth abandoned, Abeke tore through the jungle, wishing she had brought more weaponry than a knife. Then again, what good would any weapon do against the savage dog?

The animal stampeded behind them. Ferocious barks and growls impelled Abeke forward. There was no time to strategize — she ran with everything she had, driven by pure terror. The same terrain that had permitted her to creep alongside Uraza now tripped her up. Branches lashed her body, roots grabbed her ankles, and the uneven ground was treacherous. She stumbled to her knees several times and fell flat once, but always rose as quickly as she could, clawing at the vegetation, half running, half swimming through the leaves.

The gigantic dog was gaining rapidly. Any moment, those teeth would seize her. She had lost sight of Uraza. The dog was nearly upon her. Determined not to be an easy victim, Abeke drew her knife and whirled.

Her senses abruptly sharpened. She saw the overgrown canine coming and shrank into a comfortable crouch. As it lunged, she sprang sideways, swinging her knife. The tip of the blade scratched the brute's flank as the beast blurred past her.

Abeke put a tree between herself and the dog. It struck the tree with enough force to shake the jungle, but the trunk held. Abeke raced away, but the frothing dog pursued her relentlessly. She tripped, rolled onto her back, and held up her knife in desperation. The dog surged forward, mouth gaping, teeth huge in the darkness.

With a screaming roar unlike any cry Abeke had ever heard, Uraza hurtled out of the night, her jaws closing on the side of the dog's neck. The impact broke the dog's rushing attack. Leopard and dog tumbled together in the darkness, narrowly missing Abeke, snarling and spitting, teeth flashing, claws slashing.

Abeke's first instinct was to run. Her second thought was to help Uraza. But then she got the distinct impression that she should climb. The notion came so strongly that she leaped to the nearest tree, embracing the trunk with arms and knees. There were no branches to grip, but she pulled with her arms and clamped with her knees, somehow heaving herself higher and higher.

At last she found short limbs where she could rest. Behind her, she saw Uraza had taken to a tree as well, a red wound marring her magnificent pelt. Below, the frustrated dog barked and bayed and finally howled. Abeke's tree shook as the dog rammed it with manic tenacity. She held tight. She had lost her knife. Her only hope was to outlast her attacker.

Something caught the dog's attention and it ran over to another tree. Dimly, in the leaf-filtered moonlight, Abeke saw a figure high in the branches. It held a bow, and was launching arrow after arrow down at the dog.

The huge dog leaped and barked and growled. It clawed futilely at the trunk. No matter how many arrows found their mark, it didn't seek cover. Finally, with a slow inevitability, the arrows did their job. The creature sank back, took two wobbly steps, then collapsed on the forest floor with a plaintive whine.

The figure climbed down from the tree. He paused beside the rapidly shrinking dog, then came to the base of Abeke's tree. "Come down, Abeke," a hushed voice called. She knew the voice. "It's dead. Come down — we need to go."

Hugging the trunk, Abeke shinnied down the tree and dropped to the ground. "Shane! How did you find me?"

"Did you think I'd let you roam the jungle alone at night?" he replied.

"You followed me?"

“Not so loud,” Shane warned, looking away through the trees. “I’d rather the men on the beach not find us.”

“The men,” Abeke said, lowering her voice. “They made the dog into a monster! They fed it something.”

“I know about them,” Shane said. “I didn’t know they were here tonight until it was too late. Otherwise I would have steered you away.”

“How far back were you?”

“Too far. I try not to make my presence known, although I’m sure I never fooled your leopard.”

“What were those men doing?”

“They’re trying to find a replacement for the Nectar. They try out their concoctions in secret.”

“The Nectar doesn’t create monsters!”

“These men are testing different substances,” Shane said. “I don’t know all their goals. It would not end well if they caught us. We should go.”

Uraza prowled into view, her side bleeding. Crouching beside her leopard, Abeke flung her arms around her neck. “Thank you,” Abeke murmured. “You saved my life.”



VISION

IN A LOFTY ANTECHAMBER, DAYLIGHT STREAMED THROUGH A stained-glass window, splashing colorful patterns across the floor. Briggan explored the area, sniffing the corners and the furniture. When the wolf passed through the tinted light, dappled hues glossed his gray-white coat. Conor had lost track of how long they had waited. It frustrated him that even though he was no longer a servant to Devin, he was still stuck inside a castle all the time. He could tell that Briggan didn't love being cooped up either.

The door opened and Rollan emerged with Essix on his shoulder. Conor and Briggan looked up expectantly. Apparently Lenori and Rollan were finally done.

"Your turn," Rollan said.

"How was it?" Conor asked.

Rollan shrugged. "She wanted to know about my dreams. If it was a test, I don't think I passed. Have fun."

Conor entered the room where Lenori waited in a large, padded chair that dwarfed her petite frame. Her green cloak rested on a nearby table. Feathers were braided into her long hair and several beaded necklaces and bracelets hung from her neck and wrists. Her bare feet rested on a low ottoman, her soles callused and brown.

Beside her chair, a peculiar bird roosted on a tall, portable perch. The bird had a slender neck, a down-curved bill, and vibrant plumage of every shade. Lenori indicated a nearby chair to Conor. He sat down, Briggan on the floor near him. She looked at him with eyes as unfathomable as the ocean. He wondered if she could read his mind.

"How are you, Conor?"

The question was posed mildly, and seemed sincere. "Me? Honestly? I keep wondering whether Briggan came to the right person."

Lenori smiled. "No beast would bond with the wrong person, least of all a Great Beast. Where does this worry come from?"

Conor regretted having expressed the concern. Her posture was relaxed, but there was no escaping those watchful eyes. “All of this is just so far beyond anything I ever expected.”

“I think I understand.” Her voice was gentle and melodious. “Don’t pressure yourself to evolve overnight. You’ll grow into this role. Tell me about your dreams since Briggan arrived.”

Conor considered the question. “Once, in real life, I had to fight off a pack of wolves from the sheep I protected. I’ve had to relive that night in my dreams a lot lately.” He glanced over at Briggan, who had his mouth open with his tongue hanging out. It was the closest a wolf could get to smiling.

“Have any other animals visited your dreams?” Lenori asked.

“I don’t know,” Conor said. “I saw a ram not long ago. The kind with big curly horns.”

Lenori leaned forward. “Where was it? What was it doing?”

The circumstances returned to him vividly. It had been the rare sort of dream that felt exactly like real life, even in memory. He had been climbing a high, rugged mountain, the rough stone as cold as ice beneath his palms. Scaling a sheer face, he had reached a point where he could progress no farther, nor could he descend the way he had come.

As the wind kicked up, he had clung to the mountainside miserably, knowing he could continue or retreat, and either way he would fall. His muscles burning, the air too thin to satisfy his lungs, he had held on as tight as he could, knowing that eventually his strength would fail and he would plummet to the base of the cliff. Why had he climbed so high?

Since holding still meant certain death, he’d decided that he had to keep going, no matter how scant the handholds. Stretching, he hooked his fingertips over a tiny wrinkle in the rock overhead. As he searched for his next handhold, the sun crested the mountaintop, blinding him.

Squinting, grimacing, arms burning, toes slipping, he fumbled for anything to grab with his right hand. Then a shadow had fallen across him, and he peered up at the huge silhouette of a ram, staring down at him from higher still up the cliff. The sight of the beast had made him forget his peril. He had stared for a long moment before his hands failed him. He gave an agonized scream and then he fell, his stomach lurching to his throat as he hurtled toward the ground. Just as he was about to hit, he woke up, slick with sweat.

“I was in the mountains,” Conor said. “I saw it right before I woke up. The sun was in my eyes. The ram was big, but it was hard to see details.”

“Have you ever worked with bighorn sheep?” Lenori asked.

“No. But I’ve seen pictures of Arax. My parents have one. The ram in my dreams was like him.”

“Was it like him, or was it him?”

Conor was very conscious of her heightened interest. Didn’t she ever blink? He knew the answer, but felt awkward. He worried it would come across like he was trying to sound important. He glanced away, then back. “It was just a dream. But, yeah, I think it was Arax.”

“Have you dreamed about any of the other Great Beasts? Rumfuss? Tellun? Do you know all of them?”

Conor chuckled uncomfortably. “I know there are fifteen, the Four Fallen plus the other eleven. I’m no expert. I can name some of them — Cabaro the Lion, Mulop the Octopus. Arax, of course. Shepherds pay extra attention to him. With enough time I could maybe remember them all.”

“The Great Beasts have protected Erdas since time out of mind. We would all do better to be more familiar with them. Besides the four obvious ones and those you named, we have Tellun the Elk,

Ninani the Swan, Halawir the Eagle, Dinesh the Elephant, Rumpfuss the Boar, Suka the Polar Bear, Kovo the Ape, and Gerathon the Serpent.”

Conor noticed Briggan’s ears prick up. “I haven’t dreamed about the others. Just that ram. Do you mind me asking why you’re so interested?”

“I doubt it was an ordinary dream.”

Briggan stood up, watching her intently.

“The wolf seems to agree,” Lenori said.

Briggan barked, making Conor jump.

“Dreams can range from the meaningless to the prophetic,” Lenori said. “It usually takes experience to discern one from the other. The dreams Rollan and Meilin shared with me were of little consequence. I hoped for more from Meilin, but she needs to grow closer to Jhi first. I suspected your dreams might be weightier, and you haven’t disappointed me.”

Conor shifted in his chair. “Why’d you suspect me?”

“Briggan was among the more visionary of the Great Beasts. He is known by the titles Packleader, Moonrunner, and, significantly, Pathfinder.”

Conor reached out and rubbed the coarse mane on the back of Briggan’s neck. “Are you really all of those things?”

Briggan turned his head, his tongue lolling out in another wolfish grin.

“I too have seen Arax the Ram lately,” Lenori said. “That is why we gathered at the Sunset Tower in Amaya, the nearest Greencloak tower to his current domain.”

“You know where to find him?” Conor asked.

“I don’t know his exact location,” Lenori said. “But I hope we may be able to find him together. Aside from the recent return of Briggan and the Fallen, none have encountered the Great Beasts for many years. Arax is among the most solitary. He prefers the mountaintops, exercising his influence over the winds and terrain in the highest places of the world. We can’t trust luck or woodcraft to find him. The wilds of western Amaya are untamed. Unguided, we could search for years and never get close.”

Lenori paused for a moment, then spoke in a softer voice. “Would you mind trying for a waking vision?”

“Me?” Conor asked. He was no prophet. “What do you mean?”

“Briggan may be able to use your connection to share information glimpsed from afar.”

Conor rubbed his hands over his eyes. “I wouldn’t know how to begin.”

Lenori crossed to Conor and knelt before him. She took both of his hands in hers. He tried not to go completely rigid.

“Unbeknownst to some Greencloaks,” Lenori explained, “spirit animals do not only exist to let us swing a sword harder. There can be aspects to the connection more valuable than running fast or jumping high. If you relax, I believe I can show you.”

“I’ll try if you want,” Conor said. He certainly couldn’t relax with her holding his hands.

Perhaps sensing this, Lenori backed away. “Don’t try to force it,” she instructed. “Relax and gaze upon Myriam, my rainbow ibis. Watch her as you would a campfire on a lonely night.”

The bird on the perch spread her multicolored wings. She bobbed gently, causing cascades of color to ripple through her vivid feathers. Trying to follow Lenori’s instructions, Conor thought about

how he watched campfires. He tried not to stare hard at a fixed point. Without searching for anything specific, he let the rainbow ibis serve as his center of attention.

Lenori was speaking but Conor got lost in the cadence of her words. Her voice was rhythmic, a melodic pulse that steadied and calmed him. Dimly he noticed Briggan turning in a circle, first one way, then the other. He began to feel very drowsy. He blinked his eyes, but it didn't seem to help. In fact, with every blink, the room became more of a blur.

Conor stared down a misty tunnel. Where had that come from? He soared down the hazy passage without any sensation of movement. At its end, he saw a grizzly bear and a raccoon hurrying across a wide brown prairie. With an effort of will, he sped up until he glided alongside them.

There was no wind in his face, no physical evidence of his speed. But the shaggy grizzly bear ran hard, as did the raccoon. Both kept their eyes fixed on the horizon. Looking ahead, Conor saw a spectacular mountain range. Atop a distant ridge, the great ram was outlined in sunlight.

As soon as his eyes locked on the ram, Conor found himself pulled from behind. Against his will, he withdrew back into the misty tunnel until the animals became specks in the distance. The tunnel collapsed and dissolved. Conor realized that Lenori, Briggan, and the rainbow ibis were all staring at him. He felt clammy. His mouth tasted weird and oddly fuzzy, like after a long sleep.

“What did you see?” Lenori inquired serenely.

“Huh?” He felt unsteady. “I . . . I saw a raccoon and a big, shaggy bear. They were running toward some mountains. I could see Arax beyond them, up high on the rocks. They were heading straight at him.”

“A bear and a raccoon,” Lenori repeated. “Anything else?”

“I didn't notice much else. I was mostly focused on the bear and the raccoon. I had to go through a long tunnel.”

Lenori gave a triumphant smile. She took his hand, squeezing it gently. “You did it, Conor. I think you found our path.”



In less than an hour, Conor was escorted past a dozen armed guards and through multiple sets of double doors to a high room with the curtains drawn. He found Olvan, Lenori, Tarik, Rollan, and Meilin waiting, along with all of their spirit animals. Tarik's otter darted around the room in bursts of motion, clambering across furniture and bookcases. Tarik's pairing with Lumeo seemed odd, since the tall Greencloak was so serious. Olvan's moose stood near the fireplace, its massive form out of place indoors. The dignified room had a feel similar to the Earl of Trunswick's study, but it was even bigger.

Olvan stood up, rubbed his big hands together, and swept the room with his keen, knowing gaze. In spite of the white in his hair and beard, he had thick, powerful limbs and a broad chest. Age had not yet robbed him of strength or vigor. Conor could easily imagine him astride his moose, leading an army into battle.

The commander of the Greencloaks noisily cleared his throat. “I know we have kept you in suspense regarding the roles we hope you will play. You can blame me for the delay — I prefer to know the whole story before I share it. Joining the Greencloaks is merely the first step toward the vital purpose we hope you'll serve. Given recent developments” — he nodded toward Conor — “the time to act is upon us.”

Olvan strolled over to the mantel. When he turned to face the others, his expression was grave. “Centuries and centuries ago, in the last worldwide war, the four nations of Erdas battled the Devourer and his army of Conquerors. Two Great Beasts aided the Devourer — Kovo the Ape and Gerathon the Serpent. Four of the Great Beasts sided with us. Three of them are here today.”

Olvan paused to let that sink in. Feeling unworthy, Conor considered Briggan. The wolf sat listening attentively.

“Before the original Essix, Briggan, Jhi, and Uraza joined the fight, we were losing the war. None of the continents went unscathed. Most of Nilo and Zhong had fallen. The Zhongese and Niloans who escaped fled to Eura and Amaya, only to find those nations besieged as well. Cities were razed. Food was in short supply. It was only a matter of time before the Devourer declared victory.

“The Greencloaks were a fledgling organization then, but when four of the Great Beasts showed their support, the Marked flocked to join us. The Greencloaks did what nobody else had done — they mounted a major offensive, taking the fight to the Devourer. The four Great Beasts gave their lives in the fight, which is why they are known as the Four Fallen. But the Devourer fell as well, and Kovo and Gerathon were captured. The cost was great, but the four nations emerged victorious and began to rebuild.”

“What about the rest of the beasts?” Rollan asked. “The other nine?”

Olvan shrugged. “Seeing the damage that two of their own had caused, a few of the Great Beasts offered their aid at the very end. Tellun the Elk, the most powerful of them all, imprisoned Kovo and Gerathon for their crimes, and Ninani the Swan gifted the Greencloaks with the secret to creating Nectar. The rest . . . well, the Great Beasts are a strange group. They are seldom unanimous on any issue, and their purposes are almost inscrutable. They tend to remain aloof, only getting involved during times of the direst peril.”

“The Devourer didn’t count as serious trouble?” Rollan scoffed.

Olvan sighed. “One can only speculate. Perhaps some of the Great Beasts felt it best to protect their own territory, or their talismans.”

Conor looked at Lenori, a question in his eyes.

“Each of the Great Beasts protects a unique talisman,” Lenori inserted. “A totem that houses great power.”

“Except for Kovo, Gerathon, and the Fallen Beasts,” Meilin said. “Their talismans vanished after the war. Some suspect that Tellun asked Halawir the Eagle to hide them.”

“Very good,” Olvan said. “You’ve studied your history. The events surrounding the Great Beasts are often dismissed as legend. I am glad that some in Zhong have considered those deeds worth remembering outside of children’s tales.”

Meilin reddened slightly. “I heard about that from my nanny, not my instructors.”

Olvan frowned. “The Great Beasts have been out of sight for a long time. We honor the Fallen on our flags, we paint pictures, we build statues, we tell stories, but for most people, the Great Beasts belong to a time long past. Some doubt whether they ever even existed.”

“I was one of those,” Rollan said. “Until Essix came along.”

Olvan nodded. “You’re not to be blamed. It’s a prevalent opinion, shared in varying measures by the Prime Minister of Amaya, the Queen of Eura, the Emperor of Zhong, and the High Chieftain of Nilo. And yet, during the most critical crossroads in history, the Great Beasts have always played a

major role. We are now rushing toward a crisis where the Great Beasts may prove more important than ever.”

“You think the Devourer is back?” Meilin asked, her whole body quivering with agitation. “You think that is who attacked Zhong? Why weren’t we warned?”

“We had only our suspicions,” Olvan said sadly. “My voice has been raised in warning to the leaders of all the nations. But I cannot force them to heed me.”

“And we still don’t know the whole story,” Lenori explained.

Olvan nodded. “We get new information every day. Whether we’re up against the same Devourer who leveled much of Erdas long ago, or some inheritor of his legacy, we’re still not sure. What is sure is this — the Devourer can raise vast, powerful armies in a short time. He can be patient and subtle, or ruthless and brash, depending on the need. He inspires manic devotion in his followers. And he would gladly destroy the civilized world to rule over its ashes.”

“What do we need to do?” Conor asked.

Olvan glanced at Conor, Meilin, and Rollan in turn. “Our spies have learned that the Devourer has once again made collecting the talismans a top priority. Each talisman has different powers that can be used by one of the Marked. Our enemy wishes to employ those powers against us. So we’re going to recover the talismans before he can.”

“Wait,” Rollan said as the color drained from his face. “You want *us* to go after the talismans of the Great Beasts?”

“You won’t go alone,” Olvan said. “The Greencloaks have no finer warrior than Tarik. He will serve as your guide and protector. I lament that you’re all so young, but your connections to the Fallen will be critical in finding and retrieving the talismans. These talismans could change the course of the war. All of Erdas needs you.”

As the full enormity of the task hit him, Conor felt light-headed. How was he supposed to go up against a Great Beast? This was beyond dangerous. Olvan had basically handed them a death sentence.

He reached out a hand to Briggan. The wolf nuzzled his palm. Without Briggan, they wouldn’t know where to find Arax. Conor tried to steel himself. Olvan was right: If the Devourer wanted these talismans, the Greencloaks had to get to them first. Conor wasn’t sure how they would, but they needed to try. “We’ll do our part,” Conor pledged, though his voice broke on the words.

“Speak for yourself,” Rollan said.

“I meant me and Briggan,” Conor explained, flushing.

“Oh, right,” Rollan replied. He faced Olvan. “Well, I see why you need us. My question is what do we get out of it? Besides risking our lives to do something we’re not ready for.”

“As a Greencloak, this is your duty,” Lenori said calmly. “Your reward would be the same as ours — the satisfaction of defending what is right, defending Erdas.”

“I’m not a Greencloak,” Rollan said. “I may never join.”

“We’ll do it,” Meilin said, giving Rollan a disgusted glance. “Jhi and I. This is what I hoped for — a chance to make a difference. I’ve seen what’s coming. Zhong has the best armies in the world, and these new Conquerors are tearing us apart. We mustn’t let them get more power. They must be stopped. It would be my honor to join your ranks and defend Zhong as you describe.”

Conor studied Meilin with admiration and a little bit of fear. He could scarcely imagine what hardships awaited, but at least he and Briggan wouldn’t face them alone. Who did Rollan think he

was? What reward did he expect?

Rollan sighed. “And if I don’t want to become a Greencloak?”

“How selfish can you *be*?” Meilin seethed. “Zhong is under attack. The rest of Erdas will be soon. What other big offers do you expect the world to give a coward during wartime?”

“I never had any offers until Essix showed up,” Rollan snapped. “The Greencloaks only cared about me once I got my bird. There’s a city full of orphans just like me who Olvan was all too happy to pass by until he found Essix. Maybe I wonder why the Greencloaks only include Marked people. Maybe I wonder who put them in charge of the Great Beasts and the talismans. And maybe, unlike you, I don’t love getting pushed into situations I don’t understand! I want to know exactly who I’m working for and why.”

Olvan glanced at Tarik and Lenori. Slowly he stood and walked to where Rollan was seated, until he stood right before him, staring down. Conor wondered if he was trying to intimidate Rollan, but when the large man spoke, his voice was controlled. “I can understand wanting to take your time with a decision this big. I believe that time spent among the Greencloaks will relieve your doubts as to our sincerity. We don’t believe we’re in charge of the Great Beasts. We do our jobs because we know that, along with the Great Beasts, we’re the last line of defense.”

“What about the governments?” Rollan asked. “The prime minister and all of them.”

Olvan made a skeptical face. “They do what they do. They administer. They make and enforce laws. They squabble about commerce and they occasionally fight with each other. It’s just squabbling, human squabbling. But we were gifted to see something beyond the concerns of man. We were each gifted with a spirit animal. And so we will protect Erdas — all of Erdas — with everything we have.”

Rollan compressed his lips. “I’m not crazy. I don’t want Erdas to become a wasteland.” He considered. “What — what if I’m not ready to join the Greencloaks, but I’m willing to help?”

“May I suggest another option for you?” Olvan said. “We frequently work with Marked individuals who don’t accept our vows. We don’t normally give them access to our weightiest secrets, but these circumstances are extraordinary.”

“Let me sleep on it,” Rollan said.

Conor turned away and closed his eyes. Regardless of who else came along, tomorrow he would venture into the wilderness to chase a legend. Leaning close to his wolf, he whispered, “What have we gotten ourselves into?”



DREAM

MEILIN STROLLED ALONG A WOODEN WALKWAY THROUGH A manicured garden, a fragile parasol on her shoulder. She reached a bridge over a brook between two ponds. Below, ornamental carp swam in lazy circles, flashing their red, orange, yellow, and white scales among the purple blossoms of the water lilies.

Trees and shrubbery screened the house from view, but Meilin would have recognized any portion of her grandfather Xao's garden. She had grown up roaming these pathways, enveloped in the scent of these blossoms.

Up ahead, a panda was coming her way. Meilin scrunched her brow. Besides the fish in the ponds and the birds in the trees, animals had never been part of the garden.

The panda came to her on the bridge and stood up on its hind legs. "You miss Zhong," the panda said in a rich female voice. Somehow, Meilin wasn't surprised to hear it speak.

"Why should I miss it?"

The panda offered no reply.

Suddenly Meilin remembered everything. Lenori had taken her away from Zhong. While her father fought a terrible horde, Meilin had run away to the other side of the world — Amaya, the New Lands. How had she reached this garden? She hadn't. This was a dream.

Meilin regarded the panda curiously. "Are you Jhi?"

The panda gave a nod. "I am sorry to be a disappointment to you."

"You're not . . ." Meilin began, but couldn't finish. She sighed. "We're at war. I'd hoped for an animal that could help me fight. I like you, but . . . my home, and my father, are in danger."

"I want to like you too. Give me a chance and you may find I'm more useful than you suppose."

"Lenori told me that you were known as a skillful healer. You were called Peacefinder and Healthbringer."

"Among other things. Meilin, heed my words. You should get inside. This is no kind of weather for a stroll."

Meilin peered up at the sky. The only clouds were distant, wispy, and white. The sun glared brightly. "It doesn't look bad."

"You don't want to be here," the panda said.

The warning made her uncertain, and she felt a faint chill. Meilin looked around for danger.

"Close your eyes," Jhi insisted. "Ignore this illusion. Pay careful attention."

Meilin closed her eyes. Pay attention to what? A frosty sensation chilled her skin. Yes, now that she noticed, she felt very cold. And wet. She hugged herself, shivering.

Meilin opened her eyes, but the garden was unchanged. The panda stared at her.

"I'm cold," Meilin said.

"You don't want to be here," Jhi repeated.

Meilin turned and ran along the wooden walkway. The day remained pleasant around her, but her skin felt cold and wet. Thumping down the wooden walkway, she followed the turns that would lead to the door in the wall. Maybe if she could escape the garden, she could escape the dream.

The door came into view. Unsettled by the strange chill, Meilin kept watching for danger, but the garden remained tranquil. When she reached the door, she found it locked. She jiggled the handle and leaned her shoulder against it, but the door refused to budge.

Meilin paused. Goose bumps pimply her arms. This was a dream. What if she imagined herself stronger than the door? Backing up a few steps, she lowered her shoulder and charged.

The impact felt jarringly real. As she stumbled back and fell to the ground, Meilin jolted awake, her eyes opening to a confusing scene. It was dark. Rain poured down on her soaked nightclothes. By the muted moonlight, Meilin could make out that she was on the roof of a tower bordered by battlements. This was Sunset Tower! But what was she doing up here in the middle of the night during a rainstorm?

Freezing and completely drenched, Meilin shakily arose.

Before her stood a sturdy wooden door, slick from the rainfall. She tried the handle. It was locked. Her shoulder still ached from ramming it.

This was the third time she had sleepwalked since summoning Jhi. There had never been a dream associated with the experience, but twice before she had woken up doing odd things in unusual places. This, however, was the strangest by far.

Meilin tried the door again. It held fast. Would anyone hear her if she yelled? If she banged long enough?

Meilin had told Lenori about the sleepwalking. The Amayan had explained that people adapted to new bonds in all sorts of bizarre ways. Vivid nightmares were common. Mood swings. Panic attacks. Even rashes. All sorts of side effects had been observed. Developing a pattern of sleepwalking was not terribly strange.

But this was ridiculous! Her teeth were chattering. She was in real danger from the cold.

Meilin banged on the door and yelled, but her efforts didn't make much noise. The wind picked up, making her so cold that she whimpered. She stomped in place and flapped her arms, trying to generate warmth.

Then she heard the latch unfasten, and the door opened.

There was no light beyond the door. "Hello?" Meilin called softly, hands balled into fists, hesitant to cross into the deeper darkness. The cold, stinging raindrops continued their assault.

A flash of lightning, the first since she had awoken, briefly illuminated a black-and-white form.

“Jhi?” Meilin asked. Thunder boomed. The doorway was dark again. “Is that you?”

The panda gave no reply. Meilin felt stupid for expecting one.

Meilin stepped out of the rain, closed the door, then knelt down and hugged the panda. Jhi felt warm and perfect. Meilin embraced her for a long time, sinking into her thick fur and enjoying her scent as never before.

“I was sleepwalking again,” Meilin whispered. “I got myself into real trouble this time. Thanks for finding me.”

The panda didn’t respond, but Meilin felt like she understood. Meilin stood up, placing a hand against the nearest wall to help her feel her way in the dark. “Let’s get back to bed.”



“**A**BEKE!” SHANE CALLED. “ABEKE, WHERE ARE YOU?”

Abeke kept still in her tree, a slow smile parting her lips. Uraza crouched motionless on a limb beside her.

Down below, Shane blundered closer to her hiding place. “This is the wrong time for games! Remember those important people I told you about? They’re here! We shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

Ever since their ship had reached this island, Shane had gone on and on about these visitors. He seemed very impressed by them.

In many ways, Shane was her first real friend. Not only had he saved her life, but he continued to train with her, watch out for her, and even joke with her. He appreciated her hunting, her strength, her stealth — many of the traits that she most valued. Only her mother had ever made her feel accepted in that way.

Yet she had questions about the people he worked with. None wore green cloaks, but they seemed well organized. They had ships, a big outpost, and many trained soldiers. All had spirit animals. Who were they, and why did they leave Uraza so agitated? Lately, she hadn’t pressed Shane for answers. She was afraid of what she might learn.

But that wasn’t the main reason she was hiding.

“All right, Abeke,” Shane said. “I admit it. You keep improving. Even on this puny island, you and Uraza could probably evade me for as long as you chose.”

“I just wanted to hear you say it,” Abeke replied.

“There you are!” Shane greeted. “You picked the worst time to prove a point.”

Abeke descended from the tree. Uraza landed beside her. “You backed down, so I must have chosen the right time.”

“You and Uraza are really coming along as a team,” Shane said. “Our visitors will be pleased.”

“They’re really here?” Abeke asked. He might have simply been trying to lure her out of hiding.

“They’re not just here,” Shane said. “They’re waiting for us.”

She felt nervous, but hoped it didn’t show. “Lead the way.”

They started walking toward the walled buildings. “You should probably put Uraza into her dormant state.”

“Won’t they want to see her?” Abeke asked.

“It proves your abilities,” Shane said. “You’re young to use the dormant state. It also shows respect. Some of their spirit animals don’t get along well with others. If you keep Uraza with you, they’ll have to make their animals passive. It would be rude.”

Abeke could see what he meant, but wasn’t it rude for them to expect her to put Uraza away if their animals were the unfriendly ones? The visitors clearly meant a lot to Shane, so she decided not to argue. Abeke held out her arm and called to Uraza. With a stinging flash, the leopard became a tattoo.

It was not far to the walled stronghold. They passed through a massive iron gate and Shane led Abeke to the central building. They entered and went to the main chamber. A pair of guards who Abeke didn’t recognize stood outside a set of heavy doors. They bowed to Shane and let them pass.

The visitors were assembled at the far side of the large stone room. A throne had been set up, and on it sat a regal man just entering his autumn years. His temples were touched with gray, and he had a craggy face with a jutting chin. A circlet ringed his head, wrought like a snake consuming its own tail. Below his heavy eyebrows, dark eyes watched Abeke intently.

Before his throne stretched an enormous crocodile. Abeke had no idea they could grow so large. From snout to tail, it was longer than five grown men lying end to end.

“He’s a king,” Abeke murmured to Shane.

“Yes,” Shane muttered back. “Behave accordingly.”

To one side of the king crouched a wizened old woman on a stool, bundled in coarse rags. Drool dribbled from one corner of her withered lips. On the other side of the throne stood Zerif. He was dressed in fancier clothes than when they had last met, and his hair was slicked back.

“Zerif!” Abeke cried. Her eyes had been so drawn to the man on the throne and to the crocodile that she had been slow to recognize her former protector.

He gave a polite nod. “I told you that we would meet again.” He gestured toward the throne. “May I introduce General Gar, king of the Lost Lands. Sire, meet Abeke, the summoner of Uraza.”

“No small feat,” said the man on the throne. He had a voice that carried weight. It wasn’t terribly deep but, like his face, it was full of presence. A voice accustomed to giving orders.

“Is that your crocodile?” Abeke asked.

General Gar raised his eyebrows. “Indeed. A saltwater crocodile, from the continent of Stetriol.”

Abeke frowned. Stetriol? Erdas had four regions, and none were named Stetriol. She shivered as her eyes strayed to the huge reptile. Abeke had only heard of one person who ever had a saltwater crocodile as a spirit animal. The Devourer.

“What are you thinking, Abeke?” General Gar asked. “Speak freely.”

“It’s just that . . .” Abeke hesitated. “I’ve seldom heard of a big crocodile like this as a spirit animal.”

“Only once, am I right?” General Gar said with a knowing grin. He waved a dismissive hand. “It gets mentioned all the time. The Devourer, from the children’s stories, was said to have been paired with a saltwater crocodile. But he died long ago. I know it is rare across the rest of Erdas, but in Stetriol, summoning a saltwater crocodile is no cause for astonishment. It occurs from time to time.”

Abeke looked to Shane, and then to Zerif. They seemed at ease. “I see.”

“It’s true, Abeke,” Shane said. “The histories don’t mention Stetriol, but it’s a real place. I was born there.”

“He’s right,” Zerif assured her. “The Greencloaks wrote the histories, and they deliberately ignored Stetriol. No surprise there. They committed horrible crimes against the people of our continent.”

Abeke measured up Zerif. “You told me you work with Greencloaks.”

“I do, on occasion. Some of them are very good people. Others seek to dominate the world. The organization has been corrupt for a long time, and is getting worse. Listen, nobody knows more about the Devourer than the people of Stetriol — we were the first continent he conquered, all those years ago. We were grateful when the Greencloaks freed us from his evil rule, until they turned on us. Women, children — the Greencloaks tried to wipe out all life on Stetriol, as if the common people were responsible for what the Devourer had done. We had suffered under the tyranny of the Devourer, and then we suffered worse after the Greencloaks defeated him. Only by hiding did any of us survive.” Zerif’s dark eyes held Abeke captive. “The Greencloaks were ashamed of their actions and tried to hide the fact that Stetriol ever existed. For the most part, they succeeded. They removed it from the histories and from the maps. But not all the people in Stetriol perished. The survivors had descendants. General Gar is their king.”

Abeke shot a curious glance at Shane. This information was new to her, but she supposed it was all plausible.

“You are understandably puzzled,” General Gar said. “Perhaps you imagine yourself among enemies, for that is how the Greencloaks characterize everyone but themselves. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Chinwe was the only Greencloak Abeke had actually known. She had always seemed kind of mysterious, but had genuinely cared about the village. In the stories, the Greencloaks were always the good guys, but if the Greencloaks had written the stories . . .

Shifting on his throne, General Gar raised his eyebrows. “The war happened long ago. We do not hate the Greencloaks. The butchers who slaughtered our ancestors are long gone. But you must forgive us if we are slow to trust them. They tried to exterminate us once, and we fear they may do the same again. This is why we have endured centuries without the Nectar, our people suffering the illness and death that accompanies natural bonding.”

Abeke looked to Shane again. “How awful! Your bonding . . .”

“Occurred without any Nectar,” Shane said. “I was one of the lucky ones. Other friends and family weren’t.” Abeke realized with surprise that Shane’s eyes were wet. She had never seen him look so vulnerable.

“We mean the Greencloaks no harm,” General Gar said. “We mean no harm to the other nations of Erdas. We just want the chance to protect our people from the side effects of natural bonding. Our problem is that the Greencloaks control all the Nectar, and use that control to wield power over the people of Erdas. The Greencloaks should make the Nectar available to everyone.”

“They share it,” Abeke said, thinking of Chinwe.

“The good ones do,” General Gar agreed. “But they only share it on their terms. In return, they want influence, control. And those are the best of them. Some keep it for themselves. Or, worse, they share false Nectar. It is already a terrible problem in Zhong and Amaya, and the problem is spreading.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair,” Abeke admitted.

“Exactly,” Shane said. “But we can’t risk asking them directly. If they know people survive in Stetriol, they might come destroy us.”

“We have a plan to help them listen to reason,” Zerif said. “Did you know that each of the Great Beasts possesses a talisman?”

“I think so,” Abeke said, unsure. “My mother mentioned them in the stories she told.”

“All of the talismans contain powers that can be used by the Marked,” Zerif explained. “The Greencloaks are currently seeking the talismans of the Great Beasts. They wish to control all of the talismans just as they control the world’s supply of Nectar.”

“We intend to claim the talismans first,” General Gar said. “That way the Greencloaks will have to listen to us. And the talismans will give us some protection in case the Greencloaks try to wipe out Stetriol again. We cannot lose more loved ones to the consequences of natural bonding. With our modest numbers, we are risking everything to obtain a few of these talismans. Abeke, we hope that you and Uraza will help us.”

Abeke felt confused. “Me? How can I help? I know nothing about any talismans. Unless . . . do you think Uraza has one?”

“Uraza lost her talisman when she was killed, as did the other Four Fallen,” Zerif said. “No one knows where they ended up. We have people investigating those. Shane’s sister, Drina, leads that team.”

“We don’t require information from you,” General Gar clarified, and gestured to the crone on the stool. “We have Yumaris. Her spirit animal is an earthworm. Yumaris has lost touch with daily life, but she sees with a penetrating eye. She is how Zerif found you. She recently located one of the talismans, in Amaya. I want you to join Zerif and Shane to help us retrieve it.”

“You and Uraza can help repair the world,” Zerif said, his face intent. “Join us in protecting our homeland and helping to make the Nectar available to all who need it.”

Abeke frowned. Something didn’t feel right. She trusted Shane, but it was all so much to absorb. “What about the men who were making monsters?”

General Gar nodded. “Shane informed me about your unfortunate encounter. Those were not our men, but I am aware of them. They constantly experiment in the attempt to find a replacement for the Nectar. I applaud their desire to make Nectar freely available, but I have no love for their methods.”

“It was a terrible accident,” Zerif said. “We have already sent an envoy to inform them of the danger they caused and to insist they take their unnatural tests elsewhere.”

Abeke nodded. She had hoped General Gar’s people hadn’t been behind those monsters, but needed to be sure. Their cause sounded just. Everyone deserved to protect their home. Chinwe had called the Greencloaks the protectors of Erdas, but she had always been extremely secretive about the Nectar. And Chinwe was probably one of the good ones.

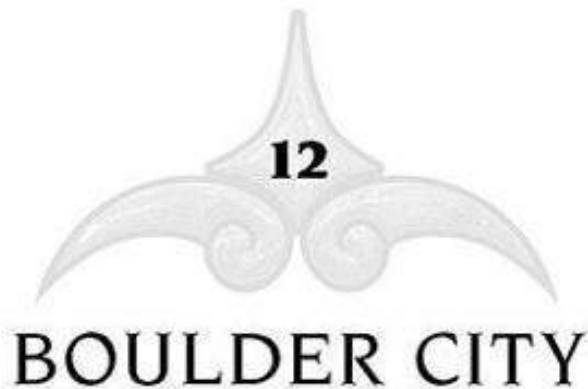
General Gar, Zerif, and Shane all seemed to respect Abeke, and even more, they seemed to need her. They had gone to great lengths to find her and to train her. Perhaps her great stealth would help them get some of the talismans.

Shane took her hand. “It’s a lot to take in,” he said. “We’re involving you in our problems. If you need some time to think this over, just let us know.”

Abeke shook her head. Here she stood, with a king asking for her help, along with the man her father had trusted to watch over her, and her first close friend in all the world. There would be time to

learn more details later. For now, she would do whatever she could.

Abeke squeezed Shane's hand. "You can count on me," she said. "I'll help you find the talisman."



FOUR HORSES CANTERED ALONG A FADED TRAIL BORDERED BY low, scrubby bushes. A long, angular ridge occasionally gave variety to the dry, rolling terrain. Rollan rode at the back of the line. A week ago, he had never sat astride a horse. After several days in the saddle, the soreness was wearing off, and he was growing more comfortable with his mount. The horses were all chargers, bred by the Greencloaks not only for power and endurance, but also for intelligence and loyalty. Rollan supposed it paid to have horses furnished by animal experts.

Conor was up ahead, then Meilin beyond him, and finally Tarik in the lead. All wore green cloaks. Olvan had provided Rollan with a gray one.

The commander of the Greencloaks had struck a deal with him. If Rollan helped retrieve this first talisman, he would receive enough money to last him a year, along with the official friendship of the Greencloaks, meaning he could stay in any of the towers and — a point Rollan was careful to include — eat their food. Rollan would receive nothing more until all of the talismans were accounted for, in which case the Greencloaks would buy him a manor and provide him with enough money for five lifetimes. Olvan had stressed that at any point throughout the process, Rollan could renounce his rewards and take up the green cloak instead.

With the crest of a long and gradual rise approaching up ahead, Tarik slowed his mount to a walk, and the others followed his lead. Overhead, Essix gave a cry and came spiraling down to land on Rollan's shoulder. Meilin wore Jhi on her hand, Tarik's otter lay curled at the back of his saddle, and Briggan loped tirelessly alongside Conor.

From the top of the rise, Rollan looked down with the others at a rustic settlement. A few dirt streets crisscrossed the imperfect rows of adobe buildings. People bustled along with a few wagons, horses, and a handful of dogs. Despite the activity, the crowds were nothing compared to what Rollan was used to in Concorba. None of the buildings looked very large to him, and several of them were in shoddy condition. The low wall around the community was made of stacked stones, which Rollan found downright pathetic.

“Our first destination,” Tarik announced. “Boulder City.”

“‘Pebble Village’ would ring truer,” Rollan scoffed.

“It’s also called Sanabajari,” Tarik went on. “Nonnatives tend to prefer the nickname. The towns are small here in the far west of Amaya. Few care to brave the dangers beyond the more settled region of the continent. The folk who live here are from sturdy stock. It would be sensible to avoid a mocking tone.”

“I see why Amaya is dubbed the New Lands,” Meilin said. “No section of Zhong is this . . . uncivilized.”

“Zhong is known as the Walled Lands,” Tarik said. “The territory within the Wall is highly developed and well-tended. But I have seen corners of the continent beyond the Wall that make Boulder City appear refined.”

“This is where we’ll find the bear and the raccoon?” Conor asked.

“If Lenori and Olvan interpreted the vision properly,” Tarik said. “Barlow and Monte used to be Greencloaks at Sunset Tower. They broke their oaths to become explorers. They’ve spent the last fifteen years roaming the wilds of western Amaya. Few, if any, have traveled this continent as widely. I’ve not met them personally, but by reputation they’re expert outdoorsmen. Barlow’s companion is a bear, and Monte’s is a raccoon. Perhaps they’ve come across Arax in their wanderings. That’s the hope, at any rate.”

“How do we know they’ll be here?” Rollan asked.

“We don’t,” Tarik admitted. “Greencloaks try to stay aware of their own, present and former. Last we had word, Barlow and Monte had established a trading post in Boulder City. If they’re not here, we’ll pick up a trail.”

They rode down a slope, through a gap in the low stone wall, and onward into town. Rollan noticed the cold stares from people on the street and in doorways, most eyes dwelling on the green cloaks worn by the other members of the group. Nearly all of the people in view were men. The majority were hardy and weathered, with threadbare clothes and rough beards.

Tarik pulled up in front of the largest building in town, a dingy white two-story structure with an amber tiled roof. A covered wooden boardwalk wrapped around the establishment, and a sizable sign proclaimed it the trading post.

In a flash, Tarik’s otter became a design on his arm. “Send your falcon aloft,” the Greencloak suggested to Rollan. “Conor, leave Briggan outside.”

“Essix, take to the —” Rollan began, but his falcon sprang into flight before he could finish.

“Would you mind guarding the horses, Briggan?” Conor asked.

The wolf sniffed Conor’s mount, then sat nearby.

“Will there be trouble?” Rollan wondered. He wore a knife at his hip. Living on the streets, he had always carried a small blade of some sort, but the Greencloaks had supplied him with the finest he had ever owned. The weapon on his belt was a true dagger, well-made and keen, almost a short sword. He had a much smaller knife tucked in his boot.

“Perhaps,” Tarik said. “Some former Greencloaks hold grudges.”

“Interesting,” Rollan murmured.

“Should we take off our cloaks?” Conor asked.

“Never out of shame or to win favor,” Tarik said. “It sets a bad precedent. We must stand behind who we are and what we represent.”

But what do you really represent? Rollan wondered. He watched a group of surly, squinting men go out of their way to walk a wide circle around the Greencloaks. An older man leading a laden mule paused to consider them, one fist on his hip. Across the street, hesitant faces appeared in the windows.

“Everyone is staring,” Conor muttered.

“Then let’s give them something to watch,” Tarik said, leading the way into the trading post. He wore his sword strapped across his back. Meilin had brought her quarterstaff. Rollan noted that Conor left his ax back with his saddle.

Everything screeched to a halt in the trading post as they entered. Diners at the bar paused mid-bite, and trading at the general store came to a dead stop. In the silence, Rollan noticed plentiful animal hides on display, along with outdoor gear and row upon row of axes, swords, and other weapons.

Tarik strode over to the counter in the general store. Several big men made way for him, their gazes ranging from suspicion to outright hostility. Behind the counter a balding man with a mischievous face surveyed the newcomers.

“Greencloaks?” he groaned with a smirk. “Official business or just passing through?”

“I’m here to look in on two former colleagues, Barlow and Monte,” Tarik replied.

The man behind the counter looked perplexed for a moment, then gave a nod. “Been some time since those two wore much green. Can’t claim to have seen either of them lately.”

“That so?” Tarik asked. “Do they still own this trading post?”

“They do,” the man replied. “It’s the most successful emporium hereabouts, which frees them from minding the day-to-day operations.”

Rollan heard a brief uproar behind him. He pivoted to see Essix gliding toward him through the open door. The falcon landed on his shoulder. Forcing a smile, he stroked the bird with the back of one knuckle, trying to act as though the appearance had been expected. As usual, Essix was out to prove she could go where she wanted, when she wanted, regardless of instructions. Both Tarik and the man behind the counter stared at him. Rollan waved a hand. “Go ahead. Don’t mind us.”

Tarik turned back to face the shopkeeper. “How long would I need to wait for their return?”

The man folded his hands on the countertop. “They own property all over. They don’t share their schedules with me, and it isn’t my place to ask. Depending on the season, the two of them can be absent for months at a time.”

“He’s lying,” Rollan blurted, regretting the words as soon as he had let them escape. It was just so obvious. With Essix on his shoulder, his perceptions felt heightened, his alertness sharpened. He could read the way the storekeeper licked his lips at the wrong time, glanced away at the wrong time.

“I agree,” Tarik said calmly.

“W-what do you mean, I’m lying?” the man sputtered.

Rollan could feel the men behind him shifting.

“What’s the lad playing at?” one particularly large guy muttered to his neighbor. “He’s got himself a gyrfalcon.”

“Your bosses aren’t in any trouble,” Tarik said.

The man behind the counter seemed to take some courage from all the grumbling. “Thanks for the assurance, stranger. Look, I’m not sure where you’re from, but around here we aren’t fond of Greencloaks butting into our affairs.”

Some of the surrounding men muttered words of agreement.

“ . . . no regard for privacy . . . ”

“ . . . holding up the line . . . ”

“Go drink your Nectar!”

Tarik stepped away from the counter. He only raised his voice enough to be heard. “I’m here on orders from Sunset Tower. If any man cares to get in my way, step forward.”

Rollan noticed that Tarik didn’t reach for his sword. He made no threatening movement. But he was a tall man with a serious face, and there was no humor in his tone. The men who had grumbled found other places to look.

Tarik turned halfway back to the counter. “I was trying to be discreet. Apparently that isn’t how things are done here. I need to see Monte and Barlow on official business. The orders come straight from the top. You’re not doing them any favors by getting in the way. We’ll return in force if necessary. They might as well get it over with.”

An outburst of murmurs followed the new explanation. The man behind the counter ducked out of sight, as if retrieving something from down low.

Rollan heard faint footfalls. “He’s running!”

Tarik leaned forward, looking over the wide counter. Showing unexpected speed, the shopkeeper popped up near the end of it, leaped nimbly over, and yanked open a window.

Rollan ran to chase him. Tarik moved to follow as well, but some of the large customers stepped in his way. With a burst of light, Lumeo appeared, and Tarik started throwing punches.

Essix flew out the window ahead of Rollan, who climbed through in time to see the shopkeeper duck behind the trading post. Rollan hit the ground running. By the time he made it around to the back of the building, the storekeeper was on a barrel, jumping for the bottom railing of a second-story balcony. Before he could pull himself up, Essix swooped at him, talons extended, and raked his arm. The man dropped to the ground.

Rollan kept coming. The man ran toward the far side of the back of the trading post, but stopped short as Briggan raced around from that direction. The shopkeeper raised his hands as the wolf approached. “All right! Chase over. Leave me be.”

Conor came around the corner from the same direction as Briggan, just before Rollan caught up to the shopkeeper. “Why’d you run?” Rollan accused.

Briggan moved in close enough to sniff the man, who flinched away. “I’ve dealt with too many Greencloaks in my day,” the man replied. “Listen, I have a thing with wolves. Especially getting eaten by them. Can you call yours off?”

Briggan wasn’t growling, but the big animal stood close and had his hackles raised.

“Not so fast,” Rollan pressed. “Who are you?”

The man sighed in resignation. “I guess I neglected to introduce myself. Name’s Monte.”

BARLOW AND MONTE

CONOR STAYED AT THE REAR OF THE GROUP AS MONTE LED them through a back room and up a flight of stairs. To think the man behind the counter had been one of the pair they were looking for! He had done a smooth job bluffing Tarik.

Meilin and Tarik had caught up to them behind the store. One of Tarik's eyes had already started to swell, and he had a cut beside his mouth. When asked, Meilin quietly assured Conor that Tarik had dealt out many more injuries than he received.

Under pressure, Monte had promised to bring them to Barlow using a back door. He warned them that his partner might not be happy to see them. Tarik assured him that it was necessary.

As Monte reluctantly led the group down a hall on the second floor of the trading post, Conor noticed a flicker of movement behind him, low to the ground. After they rounded the next corner, he waited, letting the others stroll ahead. A moment later, a furry masked face peered around the corner, ducking back immediately.

"Come on out," Conor offered.

When the raccoon didn't comply, Conor looked around the corner, but didn't spot it anywhere. The little guy was fast.

Conor caught up to the others as Monte knocked on a heavy door toward the rear of the building. It was answered by a brawny man with massive sloping shoulders and thick whiskers that came up nearly to his eyes. He stood almost half a head taller than Tarik, and Conor doubted whether he had ever seen a better human match for a bear.

The huge man glowered at Monte. "Greencloaks! At my door? Really?"

"They . . . uh . . . insisted," Monte explained.

"No surprise there," the big man said, sizing up the visitors. His eyes lingered on Conor. "I see we have some seasoned veterans of . . . what? A week?"

Conor tried to stand up straight and look older than he felt.

Monte gave a nervous chuckle. "They want to have a word with us."

Barlow locked eyes with Tarik. “You looking for trouble? You can’t own people. We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“We’re looking for Arax,” Tarik said.

Barlow’s explosive laugh made Conor jump.

“Arax?” Monte exclaimed. “Is this a prank? Who put you up to this?”

Barlow’s barking laugh subsided, but his heavy shoulders kept heaving. He wiped a tear from one eye.

“It’s no prank,” Tarik said. “The Devourer is back and he’s after the talismans. We need to get to Arax first.”

Barlow straightened abruptly and he took a shuddering breath. “The Devourer? What kind of talk is this?”

“He’s returned,” Tarik said. “As promised. Or at least somebody very much like him. Zhong is under attack. The Wall has been breached. Southern Nilo is at war as well.”

“This is rich,” Monte said. “This deserves an audience. Some lies are too big to swallow, especially on a full stomach.”

“I saw the attack on Zhong with my own eyes,” Meilin said. “A huge host bearing down on Jano Rion. I left my father behind to defend the city.”

Scowling, Barlow turned to her. “Left your father? Let me guess, the Greencloaks took you away.” She nodded.

“When will you people learn to leave kids alone?” Barlow said. “Who first decided to dress them up and equip them like adults? Who keeps the tradition alive?”

“This is a big issue of his,” Monte said with a smirk. “Don’t engage him. It won’t end well. Listen, we’re sorry to hear about a war overseas, but we don’t know the first thing about where to find a Great Beast, including Arax, so why don’t we call this conversation over?”

“You’re not bad actors,” Rollan said. “The laugh was a little much, Barlow. And you explained too much at the end, Monte.”

Barlow considered him soberly. “What’s with the gyrfalcon?”

“Take a guess,” Rollan said evenly.

With a flash, Meilin’s panda appeared, and Essix shrieked from Rollan’s shoulder.

“Are we showing off?” Barlow asked, hands closing into fists. “My bear’s bigger.”

“She’s not threatening you,” Tarik explained calmly. “Think.”

“That’s a panda,” Monte said, his smirk vanishing. “A silver-eyed panda.” He looked at Essix warily, then over at his partner.

“I get the joke,” Barlow said gruffly. “It’s in poor taste. What is this? Who are you?”

“I left Briggan outside,” Conor said, aware that the animals had made an impact on the two explorers. “But he helped me have a vision. I saw a bear and a raccoon leading us to Arax. Olvan and Lenori thought it had to mean you two.”

“They’ve seen the ram,” Rollan said. “I can tell.”

Barlow was frowning, but looked less hostile. “Let’s see the wolf.”

“You aren’t taking this —” Monte began.

Barlow held up a hand. “Let’s see Briggan.”



Barlow took his time examining Briggan, Jhi, and Essix after Conor returned. Monte inspected all three as well, but kept his distance from Briggan.

“If this is a ruse,” Barlow finally declared, “it’s excellent work.” The big man ran his hands through Briggan’s pelt with reluctant wonder.

“Are you sure you aren’t hiding Uraza?” Monte asked Tarik.

“I showed you my mark,” Tarik said. “My spirit animal is an otter. We haven’t found the girl who called the leopard. Our enemy got to her first.”

Conor watched as Monte’s raccoon hesitantly approached Briggan, backing away as the wolf sniffed him.

Barlow sat back on his heels. “You want us to believe the big showdown has begun?”

Tarik inclined his head. “The Fallen Beasts have returned, the Devourer is back and on the move — all the things the Greencloaks have worried about for hundreds of years.”

Monte shivered. “I’d hoped to be long gone before this day came. Part of me doubted it would ever happen, but it’s hard to argue with three of the Four Fallen.”

“We need to work swiftly,” Tarik said. “We must collect the talismans. Our enemies have the same goal.”

Barlow snorted. “This isn’t just a race against your enemies. Do you expect Arax to hand over his Granite Ram? He didn’t during the last war. Do you think you can take it from him? If so, you don’t know him, and you don’t know those mountains.”

“You do,” Rollan said.

“We get it,” Monte snapped. “You have a knack. You’re onto us. Essix wasn’t called Deepseer for nothing.”

This was the first time Conor had heard this term. Catching Rollan’s eye, he mouthed, “Deepseer?”

Rollan shrugged, his expression perplexed and displeased. Conor could sympathize with the feeling. What other information about their spirit animals were the Greencloaks withholding? Why hadn’t they told them all they knew?

“So you’ve seen Arax?” Tarik asked.

Barlow slowly exhaled. “We’ve seen most of western Amaya, at one time or another. Splendor like you wouldn’t believe. Ugliness too. One day high in the mountains, Scrubber showed us some very peculiar tracks.”

“Scrubber?” Conor asked.

“My raccoon,” Monte supplied.

“Like the tracks of a bighorn sheep,” Barlow said. “But way out of scale. Much too big.” He made a shape with his hands nearly the size of a dinner plate. “We followed the tracks some distance. Crazy as it seemed, they looked authentic. We were in high, lonely country. If it was a trick, it was a good one. We knew we might never get a second chance, so we followed the prints.”

“He was amazing,” Monte said. “Of all the sights we ever saw while crossing unmapped territory, nothing could compare.”

“I’ll second that,” Barlow said.

“Did you engage him?” Tarik asked.

Barlow chuckled. “We were intimidated enough watching from a distance. He knew we were there. He kicked up some wind to remind us who was in charge. When we backed off, he let us go.”

“Kicked up wind?” Meilin asked.

“Arax can influence the weather in high places,” Monte said. “Especially the wind.”

“You really saw a Great Beast?” Conor asked, his face lit with wonder.

Briggan butted his leg.

Conor rubbed his wolf. “I meant a full-sized one.”

Briggan butted him again. Conor knew he’d made a mistake, and hoped he wouldn’t have to pay for it later.

Monte glanced at Briggan, then back at the group. “You kids are traveling with legends.”

Barlow eyed Tarik. “Those mountaintops are no place for children. They’re not even a place for skilled mountaineers. Wait a few years. Let the kids grow up, gain some experience. With the animals they have, they’ll be formidable.”

Conor couldn’t help feeling a little inflated by the praise. He repressed a proud smile.

“It’s sound advice,” Tarik said. “But we can’t. We have to take the risk. It would help our odds to have skilled guides along.”

Barlow huffed and scowled. “I respect your mission. But to my mind, the Greencloaks have always been too willing to prey on the young. We get talked into committing to something before we’ve figured out who we really are. I felt ready at eleven, and I survived, but I’ve seen other young ones who haven’t. The Greencloaks are too quick to sacrifice too much.”

“We’re in an impossible situation,” Tarik said. “We will not find these talismans without the Great Beasts. If the Devourer gets them, that will be the end of Erdas as we know it.”

“Aye, but . . .” Barlow sighed. He fixed his attention on Conor, Meilin, and Rollan. “You young ones can’t understand. You can’t imagine what you’re up against. This mission is beyond me and Monte. I expect Tarik has seen and done a lot, but it’s beyond him too. We’re talking about one of the fifteen Great Beasts. Older than recorded history. Strong enough to level this town on a whim. As comfortable on a precipice as you are in your beds. Smarter and more experienced than we can imagine.”

Briggan stepped forward to stand before Barlow, ears pricked forward and head high.

Feeling a surge of confidence, Conor stepped forward as well. “You’re forgetting who we have on our side. It’s three against one.”

Essix stretched out her wings, flapping them twice.

“You’ve got assets,” Barlow admitted. “But they aren’t all they once were. You kids need time to grow, and so do they. You’d have to see Arax to grasp it.”

“We’ll search for Arax with or without you,” Tarik said. “Without you I dislike our chances, but we’ll still try. Conor saw you in a vision for a reason.”

Essix flew to perch on Barlow’s shoulder. Jhi rose up on her hind legs with surprising grace. Briggan drew near, bit the leg of Barlow’s trousers, and tugged.

Barlow sighed, his posture slumping. He spoke slowly, his eyes on the animals. “I always knew that green cloak would come back to haunt me. I spent years in places no living man has visited before or since, but deep down, in my bones, I knew that sooner or later, that cloak would find me.”

Monte glanced at his friend. “Is that how it is?”

“I’m afraid so,” Barlow said. “We better dig our gear out of storage.”

RAVENS

GROWING UP, MEILIN HAD TOURED MUCH OF ZHONG. SHE had visited the Wall in the north, the east, the west, the south, and countless points in between. Thousands of miles long, the Wall enclosed much. But she had never traveled beyond it. She had never explored wild country.

In the weeks journeying with Monte and Barlow, the landscape had steadily become more impressive. What started as prairie grew into hills and high ridges, and finally erupted into mighty mountains. Sharp stone cliffs clawed at the sky, and towering waterfalls fell toward deep gorges. The lower lands were thickly forested, and Meilin caught the sparkle of lakes in the distance, underneath peaks capped in snow. Inside the wall, Zhong's charm consisted mostly of order imposed on the natural terrain. Meilin had witnessed grand feats of architecture — temples, museums, palaces, cities. She had seen elaborate parks and gardens. She knew how water could be channeled to irrigate fields or held in reserve by ingenious dams. She had traveled on wide roads and over glorious bridges.

The splendor here was different. Untamed, unaltered, unmanaged, this beauty surpassed anything she had seen in Zhong. What building could compare to these mountains? What canal could measure up against these unruly rivers and cascades?

Meilin did not voice her wonder. She was not particularly close to any of her companions, and could not help feeling that to praise the magnificence of this wilderness would somehow diminish her and her homeland.

In spite of the remarkable sights, the trek felt long and lonely. Meilin lacked many comforts she had always enjoyed, and missed the familiarity of her family and attendants. Unwilling to get to know her companions through conversation, she relied on observation. Of anyone in the group, she admired Tarik most. He said little beyond what was needful, and had a competent bearing that reminded Meilin of her father's best soldiers.

Monte talked ten times more than necessary. Full of jokes, stories, and idle prattle, he spoke with anyone who would listen. Barlow didn't seem to mind — in fact he made an effort to ride near his friend, chuckling as Monte yammered about nonsense and memories.

Conor spent a lot of time with Briggan. It went beyond talking and petting — he seemed to have no fear of looking ridiculous or of insulting his spirit animal with horseplay. He threw sticks for the wolf to fetch, and ran around playing tag. They even splashed in creeks together. She had to admit that as a result, their relationship seemed to grow warmer. The connection between Rollan and his falcon was much more distant, and Essix stayed aloft much of the time.

Meilin had tried to communicate with Jhi. The day after Jhi rescued her, Meilin had felt very grateful. But their relationship had soon fallen back into the same old rhythms. Jhi was just so docile. The panda liked to play sedately on her own, but showed little interest when Meilin tried to initiate simple games of fetch or catch. Jhi listened whenever Meilin spoke, but offered little reaction. While the group was on the move, Jhi clearly preferred her dormant state, so that was where Meilin kept her.

Only one sleepwalking episode had occurred so far while on the trail with Monte and Barlow. Meilin had woken alone in the dark woods. Jhi had appeared before panic could fully set in, and led her back to the others. The walk had taken more than twenty minutes.

That had happened several days ago. Though Monte claimed they were getting closer to Arax, they still hadn't found any evidence of the ram. This morning they had crossed a wide valley and now they were making their way up a forested slope with little undergrowth. Barlow and Monte rode in the lead. Meilin came behind them, ahead of the boys. Tarik had the rear.

As usual, Monte chattered to Barlow. "Remember that forest on the northern slopes of the Gray Mountains? It was like this one — so much space between the trees, you could practically ride at a gallop. And we found that abandoned outpost."

"Almost abandoned," Barlow clarified.

Monte pointed at him. "Exactly! That one guy was living there all alone. How many pigs did he have? Like a hundred! He was eating bacon for breakfast, pork for lunch, and ham for dinner. And he wouldn't trade one for anything! What a boar, turning his snout up at us so he could hog them all. I wonder if he's still —"

As Essix let out a cry of warning, Barlow reined in his horse and lifted a hand. Monte sat up in his saddle and looked around.

Barlow raised his voice. "We don't want any trouble! We're passing onward to the high country."

In all directions, as far as Meilin could see, men came into view through the trees. One moment nobody was around them, and the next, there were dozens. Armed with spears and bows, they stalked forward together, moving intently, as if approaching dangerous prey. They wore leather about their loins and had capes of black feathers. Some had painted their faces in black and white. A few wore wooden masks.

Meilin's heart pounded, and she squeezed her reins tightly. How had so many warriors managed to encircle them? She tried to stay calm, tried to remind herself that battles were won with the mind. The Amayans had a huge tactical advantage. Meilin guessed there were seventy warriors, with possibly more still out of sight, closing in from all directions. None were mounted, but many had arrows at the ready. Even if Meilin's group tried to ride through them, there was no way to escape unscathed.

Three warriors broke from their pack to address Barlow. The man in the middle touched his fist to his chest. "I am Derawat."

Barlow mimicked the gesture. "Barlow."

"These lands are under the protection of the Ravens. You have no place here."

“We seek no place here,” Barlow replied. “We will not remain and will take nothing. We are going to the high country.”

“We saw you coming from afar.”

Barlow nodded. “We were not hiding. We mean no harm.”

“You will surrender to us, so that we may judge you,” Derawat said.

In an instant, a huge grizzly bear appeared beside Barlow, a shaggy brute with a hump on his shoulders. The Ravens retreated several paces, weapons clutched warily. The bear reared up to an imposing height, and Meilin felt a pang of jealousy when she considered how Jhi compared.

“We will not surrender,” Barlow said sternly. “We are free people going abroad. We have done you no harm. If you insist on trouble, we insist on trial by combat.”

The three leaders of the Amayan group conferred. Derawat announced the verdict. “You will choose a champion, as will we. You will compete in our way. If you win, you may pass. If you lose, you are ours.”

“Agreed,” Barlow said. With a burst of light, his grizzly vanished.

A group of Ravens broke off to form an escort. Tarik rode forward to confer with Barlow.

“How will this work?” Tarik asked.

“If we lose, we belong to them. They can enslave us or kill us as they choose.”

Everyone considered that in silence for a moment.

“What is the competition?” Tarik asked.

“Depends on the tribe,” Barlow replied, eyeing the Amayan warriors. “Some prefer single combat between humans. Others want spirit animals to fight. Some contests are to the death, others to submission. I’ve never dealt with the Ravens before.”

“Sour luck,” Monte grumbled. “Many Amayan tribes are peaceful and fair-minded, even generous. We planned our route to avoid the most dangerous ones and only touched the fringe of Raven lands. They must have spotted us when we crossed the valley.”

“Any objection to me handling the fight?” Tarik asked.

“It’s best to wait before we choose our champion,” Barlow suggested. “They sometimes set strange limits, or use odd weapons. I’m not bad in contests of strength. In a straight brawl between spirit animals, Jools is hard to defeat.”

“Very well,” Tarik agreed. “We’ll wait.”

The Amayans led them to a village in a meadow not far off. The dwellings were made of hides supported by wooden frames. Meilin noticed multiple fire pits, but no flames and no smoke. The warriors led the riders to a clearing in the middle of the village.

Derawat indicated a circular patch of dirt. He walked over to a vat just beyond the circle and dipped his knuckles into black sludge. “Two combatants enter the circle. Spirit animals must be dormant. The first to land ten strikes wins. Hard or soft, ten touches ends the contest. I will fight for the Ravens. Name your champion.”

Meilin watched with wide eyes as Barlow, Monte, and Tarik leaned together to confer. Should she intervene? Derawat looked quick and wiry, perfect for the type of competition he had described.

“This is a matter of speed and precision,” Barlow said. “Not my strong suit.”

“I bet I could do it,” Monte said.

“Let me,” Tarik said. “Even without Lumeo’s help, I have experience with close combat, often with sharp weapons, so I’m used to avoiding blows. I’m quick with a long reach.”

“Okay with me,” Barlow said.

“I’ll face him,” Meilin announced.

The three men looked so taken aback that Meilin tried not to feel insulted. They had never seen what she could do.

“He’s a large opponent,” Tarik began, trying to be polite.

“I wouldn’t offer if this contest weren’t made for me,” Meilin said. “I’ve been schooled in Zhongese combat arts my whole life. It’s my specialty. If any of you attempt this, the outcome is far less certain.”

Her companions looked at each other awkwardly. Tarik folded his arms and squinted.

“An answer?” Derawat asked.

“One moment,” Barlow replied. Turning back, he said, “Absolutely not. She’s too young.”

“I’ll do it before Meilin!” Rollan broke in. “At least I’ve been in some scrapes before.”

“Meilin,” Tarik said gently, “you may be right, but we haven’t had the chance to assess your talents.”

“I could show you, but I would rather surprise him,” Meilin said. “Trust me.”

There came a cry from above, and Essix dove down to land on Meilin’s shoulder. Meilin tensed. She’d never had contact with the falcon.

“Essix votes for Meilin,” Rollan said, his voice stunned.

Meilin watched the falcon soar away, hardly able to believe Essix had endorsed her. How did the falcon know about her skills? She hadn’t even realized the bird had been aware of their discussion.

Tarik gave a curt nod. “I won’t argue with that. Win our freedom, Meilin.”

“You sure the bird wasn’t voting against her?” Barlow mumbled.

“I agree with Rollan’s interpretation,” Tarik stated firmly.

Barlow walked over to Derawat. “Our champion is Meilin.” He stepped aside, extending a hand to introduce her.

Meilin came forward, and Derawat recoiled. “Is this your trick to avoid the competition? Only the lowest coward would hide behind a child.”

Barlow glanced back at Tarik, who nodded. “She’s our champion,” Barlow said, his voice betraying his uncertainty. “We’re not hiding. Defeat her if you can.”

Derawat’s eyes blazed. “This is an insult! You claim the least of you can match the best of us! I will not show mercy. You must honor the outcome the same as if I faced a grown opponent!”

“Win or lose, we abide by your rules,” Barlow growled. “Ten strikes only. Meilin is our champion.”

“There is no honor in this,” Derawat spat. “Afterward, you will suffer double for this offense.”

Barlow kept silent, but cast a meaningful glance at Meilin.

After Derawat’s cape was removed, he stormed over to the vat and dipped his knuckles in the sludge again. Meilin followed him and did likewise. It was neither warm nor cool, and had a thick, greasy feel.

The rest of the Ravens gathered to watch in silence, more than two hundred strong — old and young, male and female. Meilin hoped she was right about her chances. She had no way to gauge the skill of her opponent. What if he had hands like Master Chu? She would lose in two heartbeats.

This was obviously a contest these people practiced frequently. Derawat had the right build and acted confident. His reach would give him an advantage, as would his greater strength. If he

connected solidly, she would go down, and he would rain blows on her.

Derawat led Meilin into the circle. He looked down at her fiercely. "Any strike to the arm below the elbow does not count," he said, indicating his forearms. "Anyplace else is a hit. If you step out of the circle, you lose. No second chance. Ten strikes. Mohayli will count."

"I'll be counting too," Barlow put in.

"Questions?" Derawat asked Meilin. "I will still let you choose another champion."

Meilin sized him up. They weren't allowed to use spirit animals in this fight, otherwise she would have let Tarik take her place. The way he could jump and move with Lumeo was unreal. But without help from the beasts, she felt certain that if Derawat could defeat her, he could easily beat any of the others. She had to win. For the mission, for personal honor, for her life.

"No questions," she said.

Derawat's lips tightened and he backed away to crouch into a fighting stance. "Mohayli will start us."

Meilin shook her arms and legs, trying to loosen up. What if the masters she had trained with had all gone easy on her? She knew they often held back, but what if it was more than she realized? What if she was about to be humiliated?

No! Such doubts were poison. She had to keep her head.

A short Raven held up a hand, then dropped it, shouting, "Go!"

"You can do it, Meilin!" Conor called.

She appreciated the sentiment, but would have preferred no distraction.

Derawat danced lightly toward her, lean muscles rippling. She held still, fists ready, stance balanced. He made a couple of fake attacks, but she didn't flinch. Drawing near, he tried to coax her into attacking, but she resisted. First she wanted to determine his quickness.

Growing impatient, he finally took a true swing at her. She dodged it, sliding away from him. He attacked with more vigor, swinging multiple times and forcing her to spin and duck to avoid getting touched.

He was quick. There would be no room for error. She let him back her toward the edge of the circle, positioning herself so that a well-placed punch would push her out.

Derawat took the bait, and Meilin gave him a taste of her actual abilities. Instead of dodging away, she ducked toward him, slipping under his punch and striking the side and back of his thigh three times, left-right-left, then skipping away before he could retaliate.

"Three," Mohayli called in a surprised tone, holding up three fingers.

Meilin heard Conor and Rollan laughing with delight, but she tried not to savor the small success. She had to stay in the moment.

Derawat looked down at his leg. She had hit him in three distinct places, to ensure the marks from the sludge would be easily distinguished. He gazed at her with new respect, and no longer stepped quite so smoothly. Meilin knew what spots on the thigh would provide maximum discomfort, and she had hit her targets.

Derawat drew near with real caution, his guard up, ready to dart forward or back. It would have been easier if he had remained overconfident.

He attacked suddenly. Twice Meilin felt the breeze from his fist before she blocked the third swing and almost tagged him in the ribs with a counterpunch. He hopped away, hands raised protectively.

His next attacks were more measured, almost hesitant, and he stayed ready to defend himself. Meilin realized she would have to take the offensive. She showed him three subtle feints, and he committed hard to defend the third. Then she slid close and delivered a flurry of sharp blows — stomach, stomach, thigh, side, block, stomach, block, block, knee. She somersaulted away and scrambled to the far side of the circle.

“Five for Meilin,” Mohayli said.

“Six,” Derawat corrected, wincing. The blow to his knee had been ruthless, and her blocks had hammered the weak parts of his wrists. He was much stronger, but she knew how to focus her blows, and precisely where to land them.

As he tried to walk off his knee injury, Derawat looked at Meilin in disbelief. She returned his gaze gravely. Any gloating would dishonor him and fuel resentment. She ignored the onlookers outside the circle and stayed near the edge as Derawat claimed the center. He shook his head and waved her toward him.

With her hands down, Meilin walked slowly toward him. When he tried a sneaky punch, she avoided it and struck him twice below the ribs.

“Two,” Mohayli announced. “That makes eleven for the girl.”

As Meilin backed away, Derawat acknowledged her with a nod. She returned it politely.

Tarik, Barlow, Monte, Rollan, and Conor gathered around Meilin, barely restraining their excitement, showering her with astonished praise. The compliments made her glow inside. Only her trainers had ever seen her fighting skills, and they had never praised her like this — like it really mattered.

Tarik placed his large hand on her shoulder. “Meilin, you are full of surprises. I’ll be slow to doubt you again, or Essix for that matter. We’re lucky to have you.”



15

ARAX

ONLY A DAY AFTER LEAVING THE RAVENS BEHIND, SCRUBBER found the first oversized prints. The land around them was completely wild and there was no longer any trail to follow. The three prints were old, preserved when Arax had stepped in a muddy patch that had long since dried.

As the others mounted up to move on, Rollan remained crouched by the prints, tracing them with his finger, trying to imagine the size of Arax. Since the prints were much larger than any the horses made, Rollan knew the ram must be enormous. What ram was the size of a horse? Let alone larger!

“Are you coming?” Conor asked from astride his mount.

Rollan looked up. Having sniffed the prints, Briggan had run up front to travel with Barlow. But Conor had lingered behind.

“Ever herd any sheep this size?” Rollan wondered, rising to cross to his horse.

Conor laughed. “We had some beauties, but none made tracks like this.”

Rollan swung up into his saddle. He glanced back at the prints. “Are we sure we want to find this thing?”

Conor shrugged. “If we want the talisman.” He kicked his horse into a trot.

Rollan nudged his horse with his heels and matched Conor’s pace, staying beside him. “The talisman is supposed to be a Granite Ram, right? At least according to Tarik.”

“Yes. Its powers should have something to do with a ram.”

“We should just sit back and let Meilin handle it.”

Conor laughed. “She was sure something back there.”

“I grew up on the streets of a big city,” Rollan said. “I’ve seen — and joined — lots of brawls. Between kids, between adults. But I’ve never seen anybody fight like her. Not even close.”

“Did you see how quick she punched? She could hit me ten times before I hit her twice.”

“And she’d block both your tries. Mine too. What are we even doing here?”

“I ask myself that all the time,” Conor muttered. “But we have our animals.”

Rollan glanced skyward. Essix was nowhere to be seen. “At least you do. What’s your secret?”

“I talk to him, I play with him,” Conor said. “You see what I do. I’m not giving him secret lessons while you sleep.”

“I talk to Essix when she’s around,” Rollan said. “I feel like she tolerates me. I wish we really understood each other.”

“I don’t know how much I understand Briggan,” Conor said. “We’re closer than at first. But he likes to do his own thing too. Run off out of sight. Sniff everything.”

“But he comes back. And he pays attention to you.”

“Essix comes when it matters,” Conor said.

“I guess,” Rollan said. “I’ve always been pretty good at reading people, you know? I had to be, living how I did. Plenty of seedy folks might have hurt me if I wasn’t careful. But with Essix helping, even more little details jump out at me.”

“That’s useful.”

“I wish I could get her into the dormant state.”

“I have the same problem with Briggan.”

Rollan snorted. “The Queen of Perfection has been doing it since we met her. I’d ask how she managed it if she’d ever talk with us.”

“We shouldn’t be too hard on her. She’s probably just shy.”

Rollan laughed. “That’s one possibility. You don’t really think that’s all it is, though, do you? I know you’re nice, and you were raised in sheep pastures, but you can’t be that oblivious.”

Conor reddened a little. “Are you saying she thinks she’s better than us?”

“I said no such thing . . . but you just did.”

“Maybe she *is* better than us.”

Rollan laughed again. “You might be right. She sure fights better. She has more control over her spirit animal, she’s rich, she’s prettier, and her dad is a general.”

“We’re all on the same team,” Conor said. “Whatever her background, Meilin joined the Greencloaks just like me.”

Rollan’s face clouded. “I get it. I’m the black sheep. You’re all Greencloaks — I’m not. Why are you always pressuring me?”

“That pressure you feel is called a conscience,” Conor said, holding Rollan in a steady gaze.

“I wouldn’t know about consciences. My mother didn’t teach me much before she abandoned me.”

“My father rented me as a servant to pay his debts,” Conor returned.

Rollan couldn’t believe this was becoming a competition. “Look, my terrible childhood is all I’ve got! Don’t you dare try to top it.”

That won a reluctant smile from Conor. “You never saw my father in a foul mood,” he joked. “But yeah, I guess you win.”

“It’s nice to win at something,” Rollan said.



Later that day, the wind picked up. As clouds gathered, the sky darkened to the uneven color of an old bruise. The afternoon grew colder, and Conor showed Rollan how to wrap his blanket over his cloak.

“You need layers,” Conor warned as he situated his own blanket around his shoulders. “Once you start to freeze, it’s tough to get warm again.”

“Think it’ll get worse?” Rollan wondered.

“I don’t like this sky,” Conor said. “I’ve only seen it like this when harsh weather is coming.”

“You’ve a good feel for it,” Barlow said, approaching on his horse. “If we were on flatter ground, I’d worry about tornadoes.”

“Tornadoes!” Rollan exclaimed. He studied the ugly clouds. Of course there would be tornadoes. Otherwise fighting the giant ram would feel too easy. “Wouldn’t they be worse in the mountains? We’d get blown off a cliff.”

The terrain had grown more rugged throughout the day. The ravines were deeper and steeper, the surrounding peaks loomed higher, and the evergreens grew in odd, twisted shapes at this altitude. They passed broad expanses of bare rock and jumbled scree. Rollan didn’t like when his horse had to walk near a drop-off, as they were now. He was allergic to the whole falling thing.

“There aren’t as many whirlwinds in the mountains as you’ll find in open country,” Barlow said. “But that doesn’t mean things won’t get nasty. We could get a windstorm. Rain. Maybe a blizzard.”

“We could probably take shelter against that precipice up ahead,” Conor said, pointing. “It’s angled to provide some overhang, so the rain can’t fall straight on us. Unless the wind changes, it should shield us quite a bit. The little pines by the base will give us extra protection. And there’s plenty of higher ground in the area to draw off lightning.”

“Whoa!” Barlow exclaimed. “Somebody has spent some time outdoors!”

Conor dropped his head, but Rollan could see he was pleased. “I used to herd sheep.”

“Monte!” Barlow called. “Conor thinks we should pause at the base of that precipice until we see how the weather is turning.”

Monte stopped his horse and scanned the area. “The boy has some sense. I agree.”

“Just you wait until we have to scrounge a meal in a bad neighborhood,” Rollan told Conor. “Then you’ll be glad I came along.”

“I’m already glad,” Conor said. A big gust almost blew his blanket off. He gripped it tightly until the wind subsided. “You might want to call in Essix.”

Rollan looked up. The sky had gotten even murkier, and he couldn’t see his falcon anywhere. “Essix!” he yelled. “Come in! There’s a storm brewing!”

The wind gusted again, and stinging pellets of grit hit his face. As the wind died down, he heard the clack of pebbles falling around him, but there was nothing above but the open sky.

“Hail!” Barlow bellowed. “Ride for the rock face!”

Something clonked Rollan on the head. It hurt even through his hood. He now saw that what he had taken for pebbles were balls of ice, growing bigger by the second.

Conor broke into a gallop. Rollan dug his heels into his horse and snapped the reins. As his mount started running, the hail began to pelt down in earnest. Hailstones battered the surrounding rocks, ricocheting wildly.

A stone hit him on the hand, shocking him with the force of it. Rollan ducked his head to protect his face. The wind gusted again, full of projectiles. Tarik and Meilin had already reached the modest shelter. Monte would get there next. Then Conor. Barlow was bringing up the rear.

A hailstone struck Rollan square in the forehead. Before he knew what had happened, he had tipped sideways in his saddle and was leaning crazily over the horse’s flank. One foot remained in its stirrup, but Rollan’s whole weight was off-balance and the ground rushed under him, alarmingly close. Tilting forward, he embraced his horse. To fall on the rocks at this speed would mean serious

injuries. His horse slowed to a trot, and a strong hand grabbed Rollan by the shoulder and righted him in his saddle.

“You okay?” Barlow checked, yelling over the wind and the clattering hail.

Considering the circumstances, Rollan figured being alive was the same thing as being okay.

“Let’s keep going!” Rollan replied, leaning into the neck of his horse.

The hail was really coming down. The smallest pieces were now as large as Rollan’s thumb. Some were almost the size of his fist. He could feel the agitated breathing of the horse beneath him as they raced toward the shelter.

Rollan and Barlow reached the safety of the precipice and swung off their horses. Only when Rollan tasted blood in his mouth did he realize that it was spilling down his face from a gash near his hairline.

Tarik had Rollan sit with his back to the precipice, and the veteran Greencloak produced a clean handkerchief. Hail continued to smash down noisily, but it couldn’t hit them directly. Some fragments skipped their way after impact.

Conor helped Barlow and Monte position the horses so they would provide an extra barrier against the wind. Meilin came and crouched beside Rollan, Jhi beside her. The panda leaned over and licked Rollan’s forehead.

“Would you look at that,” Tarik remarked.

“What?” Rollan asked. Something already felt different.

“Your wound is closing up,” Tarik said. He looked up at Meilin. “Did you know what Jhi was doing?”

“I released her and asked her to help him,” Meilin said. “Jhi is supposed to be a gifted healer.”

“It wasn’t a horrible wound,” Tarik explained, “but it might have bled a lot. Thanks to the panda, it’s clotting already. You’re lucky.”

“Is that what you call it when an iceberg lands on your head?” Rollan asked.

“It’s what I call it when most of the harm is undone,” Tarik replied.

Rollan glanced guiltily at Meilin and Jhi. “Thanks. That was kind. I think I can take it from here.” He still felt a little woozy, and wasn’t sure how much panda spit he wanted on his face.

“Happy to help,” Meilin said.

While Barlow and Monte tried to light a fire, Tarik made sure everyone was as bundled as possible. The wind was howling now, but their shelter kept them from the worst of it. The hail shrank to marble-sized pellets, accumulating in drifts.

“I’ve never seen a hailstorm like this,” Monte commented after he gave up on the fire and the group huddled together for warmth. “It can’t be coincidence.”

“You believe Arax sent it to drive us away?” Meilin asked.

“If so, it’ll take more than a little ice,” Tarik said.

“Tell that to my skull,” Rollan grumbled. “No luck with the fire?”

Monte shook his head.

“Too much wind,” Barlow said. “And no good kindling.”

Between the legs of the horses, Rollan could see the hail blowing almost sideways now. With growing desperation, he scanned the skies for Essix, but couldn’t find any trace of her.

“Do you guys think Essix will be all right?” he asked, almost scared to voice the question.

“She probably found shelter before we did,” Barlow said. “Her instincts should keep her safe through worse than this.”

“The ice just keeps coming,” Monte noted.

“We’ll wait it out,” Tarik said. “No storm lasts forever.”

Rollan nodded vaguely, unsure what they should fear more — the storm, or the ram that had sent it.



The hail finally relented around nightfall. Once the wind died down, Barlow and Monte got a fire going. During the night the chill broke, and by daybreak all traces of ice had melted away.

Not long after sunrise, Essix swooped in looking as sleek and glossy as ever. Rollan welcomed the bird warmly, feeding her from his saddlebags. Despite assurances from Barlow, Rollan had imagined Essix wet and suffering, delicate bones pummeled by hailstones. The falcon acted as though nothing unusual had happened, flying away once she had eaten. Rollan accepted her nonchalance with relief.

After two more days of slow trekking, they found giant ram tracks again. This time Briggan located them before Scrubber.

“Not fresh, but not old,” Monte said after examining some of the sizable prints. “Less than three days. Maybe less than two.”

“That’s really close,” Rollan said. He motioned toward some bushes. “Just to be safe, one of us should stay here and hide.”

Monte chuckled. “Maybe two of us.”

Rollan worried more than ever as they followed the tracks onward. Part of him had suspected they would never find Arax. It just seemed so far-fetched to actually encounter a Great Beast. But the fresh tracks made the possibility all too real.

They followed a mountain ridge into even more jagged country. The metallic smell of granite dominated the cool, thin air, although they could still detect a hint of pine. Vegetation became increasingly sparse — small, warped evergreens clinging to life in meager patches of soil. At times, their path led along narrow ledges barely wide enough for the horses. As they traversed a section with a dizzying cliff to the left and a sheer rock face to the right, Rollan tried not to think about what would happen if his horse stumbled. It became harder to find prints on the stonier ground, but Briggan never seemed to lose confidence.

In the afternoon, they reached a precarious stretch where the horses could not pass. Everyone collected their essential gear and weapons as Barlow and Monte hobbled the mounts. They proceeded on foot, edging sideways along a narrow lip of rock, backs to the wall. A huge drop yawned just beyond their toes. Rollan envied Essix, gliding on the breeze while everyone else risked a tremendous fall. But nobody lost their balance, and Briggan practically ran across.

On the far side of the ledge, they caught sight of Arax for the first time.

Four peaks were in view, connected by lofty saddles and laced with snow in high, shadowy pockets. The ram stood in the distance, atop a knob of stone, backlit by the sun. Even from afar, they could see he was enormous, the massive head crowned by the curling bulk of his horns. For a moment, everyone stood frozen, and then Arax leaped down out of sight.

“That was a bit closer than last time,” Barlow said, stroking his lips with a nervous hand.

“I wish we had more daylight left,” Tarik said grimly.

“He saw us,” Barlow said. “If we wait to pursue, he could be long gone by morning.”

“Then I vote we wait,” Monte said dryly.

Tarik, Briggan, and Conor led the way forward. They stepped carefully down and across an incline composed of jumbled stone, like a huge rockslide that had ground to a halt.

Down where the rock-strewn slope ended with a drop-off, they came around an immense stone slab and got a clear view of the widest, longest ledge yet. One side of the ledge bordered the slab — the other fell away to the valley floor. Awaiting them on the ledge was Arax.

The ram stood nearly twice as tall as their largest horse. His coat was dark silver, his thick horns golden. His form was sturdy and strong, with heavy bunches of muscle at the top of the legs and throughout the neck.

Rollan gaped up in amazement. The ram’s sheer size made him feel as though he had shrunk. This animal was older than nations, and somehow that long history seemed woven into its majestic presence. This was not a creature you stole things from — it was a creature you revered. Rollan glanced at his companions, who stood awestruck.

Arax’s ears twitched. He gave a snort, and his forelegs stamped restively. Rollan wasn’t sure what the ram expected. Were they supposed to speak? Should they run? Bow down? Arax’s eyes were unsettling, yellow as raw egg yolks, with horizontally slit pupils.

“You seek me openly,” Arax declared in a resonant voice. Rollan wasn’t sure whether he heard it with his ears, or just his mind. It seemed impossible that this gigantic beast could speak. “I have encountered two of you humans before. I let you depart in peace. Why have you returned?”

“We were guided here by a vision from Briggan,” Barlow said.

Arax cocked his head. “Briggan?” The ram’s nostrils flared. “Yes, I see. I sensed uncanny presences. I recognize them now. They are different than when we last met. Briggan and Essix. Their time has come again.”

Rollan checked the sky. Essix wheeled nearby, drifting on a breeze.

With a flash, Meilin produced Jhi. The panda sat and stared at Arax.

“Jhi as well,” Arax said, tossing his head. “Uraza?”

“Uraza is not with us,” Tarik announced. “But she has also come again.”

“I welcome their return,” Arax said. “They are far from all they once were, barely saplings, but grandeur oft proceeds from lowly origins.”

“The Four Fallen have not returned alone,” Tarik said. “The Devourer is back.”

“Ah,” Arax said. “You seek counsel. Old forces have grown active. You can cage a Great Beast, but not forever. Gerathon and Kovo are stirring.”

Tarik started. “Is the ape loose? Has the serpent escaped?”

“If not, it will not be long. I am not as sensitive to such matters as some. Tellun is greatest.”

Briggan barked.

Arax dipped his horns. “And Briggan, in his time. Some of the others.”

“The Devourer will come after your talisman,” Tarik said. “With respect, we have come to ask if you would lend it to us. We will need help in the upcoming war.”

Arax snorted and stamped, the impact of his great hoof against the rock ringing out like a blow from a sledgehammer. “My talisman? Utter no such folly in my presence.”

Landing on Rollan’s shoulder, Essix screeched. Her talons bit into him, digging through his cloak.

Rollan swallowed and gathered his voice. “I don’t think she agrees,” he ventured.

The yolk-colored gaze turned to him. “I understand her much better than you do,” Arax rumbled. “The Fallen held that united resistance was the solution. And they fell.”

Briggan growled. Essix gave a long cry and stretched her wings. Even Jhi rose up, staring at Arax with uncharacteristic intensity.

“It’s also how the Devourer was stopped,” Tarik said. “It’s how Kovo and Gerathon were caged.”

“Should they have been caged?” Arax challenged. “Their hate has fermented. They can’t be destroyed, not permanently, not while our order remains. Bad things happen when our kind come together in anger. Better for us to remain apart in our own realms. None claimed my talisman in the previous war, and none will claim it now.” The ram once again raised his hoof and struck the rock. “I have spoken.”

“Is that it?” Rollan asked in disbelief.

“Please reconsider,” Tarik said. “We must have the talisman. Our foes won’t relent, so neither can we.”

Arax jerked his head high. His nostrils flared twice and his ears shifted. “Traitors!” he bellowed, eyes suddenly crazed. “Many strangers approach! You have lied, for Uraza is with them! You will pay dearly!”

The ram reared up high on his hind legs and heaved forward, charging Tarik.

ARRIVALS

AS ARAX LUNGED, TARIK DOVE ASIDE, NARROWLY AVOIDING the charge. The ram's huge horns struck the stone slab with the force of an earthquake. Chunks of rock exploded out, and a web of cracks spread across the hard surface. The ledge vibrated beneath Meilin's feet.

Tarik pulled his sword out, and his otter appeared with a flash. Arax sprang again, but this time Tarik flipped gracefully out of the way.

Meilin surveyed the battleground. The ledge was very wide where they currently stood, and ran more or less level before it tapered to nothing in front of them. Beyond the lip of the ledge, a sheer drop awaited.

With a burst of light, Barlow released Jools. The grizzly bear slammed into Arax's rear leg, sliding the ram sideways and forcing him to quickstep to avoid stumbling. Arax kicked out sharply and caught the bear with a glancing blow from his huge hooves that sent Jools tumbling along the ledge.

Meilin raced back to check out the newcomers Arax had been so angry about. Hopefully Uraza was bringing reinforcements — a second detachment of Greencloaks would come in handy against the giant ram. Meilin curved around the massive slab and peered up the rocky slope.

Ten — no, eleven — people were coming in her direction, from only a short distance away. None wore green cloaks, though several had spirit animals. A Niloan girl ran alongside a leopard, springing lightly among the rocks. The magnificent leopard moved with that peculiar combination of grace and power unique to big cats. The girl was lithe, tall for her age, and advanced confidently. There was a subtle synchronization to their movements, almost as if they were influenced by the same secret music. It had to be Uraza and her partner.

Meilin also saw a baboon, a wolverine, a cougar, a jackal, and an Amayan condor with widespread wings. She had seen all of these creatures in Zhongese menageries, but watching them charge down the slope toward her was a different experience than viewing them in a pen or a cage.

“They aren't Greencloaks!” Meilin called.

“This wasn’t an ambush!” Tarik yelled to Arax. “These newcomers have been sent by our enemies!”

The ram charged him again, and Tarik dodged to one side. There was an opening where he could have used his sword, but he didn’t take a swing.

“You’re all here for the same purpose!” Arax raged. “You want to steal my Granite Ram!”

Rollan, Conor, and Monte dashed over to Meilin while Barlow and Tarik confronted Arax.

“It’s Zerif!” Rollan cried.

The man with the sculpted beard raised his head and saluted. A jackal ran near him. “We meet again!” Zerif called, moving closer. “I like the color of your cloak, Rollan.”

“Are you here to fight us?” Rollan asked.

“Not if you join us,” Zerif replied with a confident laugh. “Sylva, find the talisman.”

A vampire bat flashed out from the wrist of one of the women. She clutched it in both hands, eyes closed. A moment later her eyes opened — were they darker? “Done,” she said.

“Go get it,” Zerif said. “The rest of us will mop up the mess.”

The woman headed off while the rest of the group scrambled closer. “Abeke!” Meilin called to the dark-skinned girl. “We’ve been searching for you. Why are you helping them?”

“She wants Uraza on the right side of the fight this time,” said the boy rushing alongside the wolverine. “It’s time for the Greencloaks to stop controlling the world.”

Hackles raised, Briggan growled. Uraza snarled right back at him. The savage tension between the two beasts made Meilin ready her quarterstaff.

“Back up,” Monte advised, retreating behind the sheltering slab. “They’re coming down at us. Keep out of sight for as long as possible. Make them fight on level ground.”

He was right. Meilin backed up with the others, her stomach fluttering nervously. She had never engaged in actual combat before! Even the fight with the Raven warrior had been a contest with set rules. How would she fare with her life on the line? How dirty might these opponents fight?

Meilin noticed Jhi scraping at a weed that protruded from a crack. “Jhi! Are you going to help me like how Lumeo helps Tarik? We’re in trouble. I could use whatever power you can lend me.”

The panda gave her a neutral stare, then picked at the weed again. Meilin looked away in disgust.

Conor repeatedly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, ax clutched tightly, his knuckles white. Briggan paced beside him, his fur upright.

“You’ll do fine,” Meilin told Conor.

He glanced over with a queasy smile. “I’ve chopped a lot of wood. If they hold really still, I’ll do great.”

Meilin gave a surprised laugh. It took courage to joke at a time like this.

Rollan stared at the sky. Essix circled high above. “Are you going to help?” he called, obviously frustrated.

Glancing over her shoulder, Meilin saw Barlow on the ground below Arax, trying to avoid the stomp of his massive hooves. Tarik and Jools closed in to assist. When she turned back, an Amayan man sped around the edge of the slab astride a buffalo. She and the others dove out of the way as more enemies dashed into view.

Meilin was only partially aware of the surrounding tumult. Briggan snapping at the underside of the buffalo. Conor holding a mountain goat back with wide sweeps of his ax. Rollan retreating while

brandishing his dagger. Monte hurling a stone with a sling. Her primary attention was reserved for the woman approaching boldly beside a cougar.

Meilin crouched into her fighting stance. Jhi raised up on her hind legs beside her. Clutching a spear, the woman sprang toward Meilin, leaping farther than seemed possible, lips peeled back in a hateful grimace. Meilin used her quarterstaff to bat away the spearhead, then spun and cracked the woman on the side of her skull. She crashed to the ground in a boneless sprawl.

Meilin prepared to face the vengeance of the mountain lion. Coiled to pounce, the cougar stared at her panda. The big cat maintained the same pose for several seconds. On her hind legs, Jhi walked toward the mesmerized mountain lion and placed her paws at either side of its head. The cougar's eyes drooped, and it curled on the ground, soundly asleep.

"Better than nothing," Meilin murmured, scanning the area.

Barlow was helping Tarik lead the ram back along the ledge toward the new enemies. Meilin approved of the strategy — let the newcomers help tangle with the biggest threat. Briggan had rejoined Conor. An Amayan man lay on the ground near them, and his mountain goat was retreating from teeth and ax. Monte wrestled with a Zhongese woman whose agile mongoose tussled with Scrubber. He looked overmatched.

Meilin's father had warned that there was little room for sportsmanship on the battlefield. When survival was in question, you fought hard and you seized every advantage, because your enemy was sure to do the same. So Meilin ran to Monte, bashed the woman on the back of her head, and then clubbed the mongoose.

The buffalo charged Arax. Barlow and Tarik sprang clear. Though big and strong, the buffalo looked pathetic compared to the hulking ram. An Amayan man ran behind, shouting for his buffalo to stop. Ram and buffalo came together head to head with a sickening crunch. The buffalo flopped backward, disgustingly crumpled, and the man screamed.

Essix screeched overhead. Looking up, Meilin saw Abeke and Uraza perched atop the stone slab. Harassed by Essix, Abeke tried to aim her bow down at the skirmish. The falcon dove in to disrupt her shot, talons clawing at the girl's hands. Uraza snarled, batting at the bird with lethal paws. Essix shrieked again.

"No, Abeke!" Meilin called. "You're fighting for the wrong side!"

Abeke tried to shoot Essix but narrowly missed. Meilin looked for Jhi, and found the panda carefully climbing the least steep edge of the slab where Abeke perched, down at the far side.

Tarik was locked in sword-to-sword combat with Zerif. Tarik moved like an acrobat, twisting and leaping with vicious grace, but Zerif seemed up to the challenge, deflecting every blow and attacking with astounding speed.

"Meilin, look out!" Monte warned.

Meilin pivoted just in time to dodge a sword thrust from the boy with the wolverine. His saber had a gleaming blade and a gilded hilt. Meilin tried to undercut his legs with her quarterstaff but he jumped the attempt and once again very nearly stabbed her. As she tried to attack with her quarterstaff he chopped it in half, and when she tried to fight with one half in each hand, he quickly shortened both halves with precise strokes. He was skilled and quick, and Meilin doubted whether she could stand against him even if she had a sword.

Backing away, Meilin pulled out her club. It was thicker and shorter than the quarterstaff, and banded with iron.

Rollan came flying out of nowhere with his dagger, but the skillful boy parried the attack and kicked him away. The wolverine got hold of Rollan's arm and shook it viciously.

"You have talent," the boy said to Meilin. "It's a shame you fight against us."

"Your people are invading my homeland," Meilin growled.

"It's a compliment," the boy said. "We admire Zhong. We dream of a better Zhong, free from the oppression of the Greencloaks."

Meilin attacked with her club. He dodged one lightning-fast blow, blocked another, then took the offensive. Meilin backed away, barely holding her own in the onslaught. When he came with an overhanded stroke, she was so busy deflecting it that she never saw the kick that swept her feet out from under her.

Standing over Meilin, saber poised to strike, the boy grinned. "Let me suggest that you yield."

GRANITE RAM

FROM HER POSITION ON THE STONE WALL, ABEKE HAD A CLEAR view of the battle. Down below, Zerif dueled a tall Greencloak who moved in ways she had never imagined — twirling and flipping without ever mishandling his sword. Shane fought a Zhongese girl who was putting up surprising resistance considering how young and small she looked. Abeke wanted to help him with her bow, but the pesky falcon kept diving at her, sharp talons threatening her bowstring. Abeke had already wasted two arrows trying to hit the bird at close range.

Uraza gave a low growl. Abeke thought she understood what the leopard wanted. Crouching low, Abeke held her bow near Uraza, nocked an arrow, and aimed downward again. When the falcon flew near, Abeke leaned away and Uraza jumped straight up, catching a wing in her jaws. The falcon struggled for a moment, but after a threatening rumble from Uraza, the bird went limp.

Abeke set the arrow to the string again and bent her bow. It would probably help most if she put an arrow through the Greencloak fighting Zerif. Or she could drop the big guy with the bear. Of course, for now he was distracting Arax, so she should probably leave him alone. The ram had already crushed the buffalo and trampled Neil along with his baboon.

As she searched for a target, the bow trembled in her hand. Did she want to shoot a Greencloak? She had come here committed to help Zerif and Shane get the talisman. But none of this felt right.

The Zhongese girl had a panda. The boy with the ax had a wolf. And the gyrfalcon that had challenged her — was it Essix? She was up against the other members of the Four Fallen. So who was on the wrong side?

Shane and Zerif wanted her to stand with them. Well, truthfully, they wanted Uraza. Abeke frowned. Nobody had shown much interest in her until the leopard showed up. Paralyzed with indecision, Abeke was losing her chance to take action.

The panda approached her unhurriedly from along the top of the high slab, its striking silver eyes set in the black, furry mask. It had to be Jhi, from the stories. Tales told by the fire were coming to life all around her — Greencloaks, Arax the Ram, the Four Fallen. When this new story was told, would she be a hero or a villain?

With the falcon still gripped in her mouth, Uraza watched the panda approach. Jhi looked ridiculous atop the wall, too round and ungainly to cross the thin ridge. Abeke turned her bow toward it.

Uraza looked back at Abeke and growled low in her throat without releasing the falcon. Abeke immediately lowered her weapon. Uraza had never scolded her that blatantly before.

The panda drew near and sniffed Uraza. The leopard released the falcon, which leaped from the slab and took flight. Uraza must have held the bird very gently, because its wing was undamaged. Those powerful jaws could have torn the wing clean off had Uraza desired.

Uraza touched noses with Jhi, then looked up at Abeke and made a purring sound.

“You recognize Jhi?” Abeke asked.

Uraza stared intensely at her with those bright violet eyes. For once, Abeke felt deeply unsure about what the leopard wanted.

Abeke squeezed her bow. If she didn't want to actually hurt any of the Greencloaks, perhaps her safest bet was to run for the talisman. It was why they had come. If she could get it away from here, that might end this bloodshed.

Down below, Shane stood over the Zhongese girl, his blade poised to strike. She was on the ground, defenseless. Then a boy with Shane's wolverine dangling from his arm tackled Shane from behind. Abeke gasped. Blindsided by the attack, Shane went down hard and lost hold of his blade. One of his legs was twisted at an unnatural angle. The girl picked up the sword and held it threateningly. Looking woozy, Shane called off the wolverine.

“We won't fight Jhi,” Abeke told Uraza. “But please don't let them hurt Shane.”

Uraza turned and sprang from the wall with a mighty roar. It was a fairly long drop, much farther than Abeke would willingly attempt. Uraza pinned the Zhongese girl down with one paw, and the Amayan boy with the other. The girl looked momentarily terrified, but when Uraza fended off a fresh attack from Shane's wolverine with a loud snarl, she glanced up at Abeke. Holding her eyes, Abeke nodded gravely. The girl's expression transformed to one of bewilderment.

Abeke scanned the sky for Essix, and caught sight of the falcon hovering above the main ledge at the point where it tapered down to nothing against the cliff face. Below the falcon, Sylva stood near the edge, watching as her bat fluttered around a small rock shelf well beyond the ledge. She appeared to be stalled. The talisman was probably out of reach, over by the bat. Nobody down below seemed to notice Sylva. Bow in hand, Abeke dashed along the top of the wall. If she joined Sylva, perhaps they could reach the talisman quickly and escape.

Abeke climbed down the least sheer face of the slab she could find, scraping her arms and legs in her haste, and falling the last third of the way. She landed well on the main ledge, and found her leopard waiting.

“We have to get that talisman,” Abeke said, running along the ledge at top speed.

Up ahead, the falcon snatched the bat out of the air. Sylva screamed, extending her arms toward her spirit animal. After brutally shaking the bat, the falcon let go and it fell limply, down, down, until it was out of sight. Sylva dropped to her knees and peered over the brink, wailing and calling out for it.

Abeke kept sprinting.

Essix flew to the small shelf beyond the ledge where the bat had fluttered. Abeke could now see that on the little shelf was a rough stone box formed by stacking hefty blocks. The falcon pecked and

clawed at it, but couldn't open it.

“Keep away from there!” Arax bellowed, his great voice filling the mountainside with its echoes. “Begone, thieves and deceivers!”

With a sound like a mighty river, a terrible wind blasted along the ledge. It hit Abeke from behind, pushing her forward. Essix was hurled from the shelf and spiraled out of control, striking the wall of the cliff again and again before finding refuge in a sheltered nook.

Abeke remembered Zerif warning that Arax could influence the wind. But a Rain Dancer normally had to labor for days to influence the weather — Abeke had not expected instant gales conjured out of nothing. The violent currents of the wind shifted unpredictably, forcing Abeke to adjust to keep from falling. Uraza ran beside her, fur flattened by the gusts.

Finally Abeke reached Sylva. “How's the bat?” she asked.

“Boku landed on a skinny perch way down there,” Sylva replied, looking over the side with panicked grief. “He's hurt.”

Abeke considered the shelf with the stone box. It was higher than their present position, and well beyond where the big ledge ended. She noticed some minor ledges and outcroppings in between. She looked at Uraza.

“Think I can make it?”

Uraza nudged her encouragingly.

Abeke's senses grew sharper. She was drawing in Uraza's perception, experiencing her power. As she saw the mountainside in greater relief, more handholds and footholds became evident. Confidence welled up inside. She laid down her bow and settled into a crouch. The wind was blowing at her back. The nearest ledge was well beyond the range a normal person could reach with a jump. But with Uraza's support, Abeke was no normal person.

She ran and jumped, the wind boosting her leap, and skipped off the targeted ledge to a smaller one. She only touched the next ledge once, then stretched forward and clung to a knobby outcropping with both arms, earning stinging scrapes from her wrists to her elbows. The wind howled and swirled around her. Abeke hoisted herself atop the outcropping and sprang again. This time the wind slowed her, and even with the extra power in her leap, she barely caught her next handhold. Abeke steeled herself not to look below. She knew there was nothing but a sheer drop beneath her.

With the deafening wind pushing against her, Abeke pulled herself up. She edged along the thin ledge as far as she could before a final jump brought her to the shelf with the box.

“No!” Arax boomed. “No, no, no, no, no!”

The wind redoubled in force, and the entire mountainside shuddered. Staying low and leaning into the gale, Abeke fought her way to the box. Pushing with all of her might, groaning as she adjusted for maximum leverage, Abeke toppled the weighty lid. Inside she found a granite carving of a ram, attached to a thin iron chain.

The wind abated but the mountainside quaked harder. Some of the nearby ledges and outcrops crumbled away, plummeting down the sheer face into the deep valley below. Praying that the talisman would somehow aid her, Abeke slipped the chain over her head.

Abeke wobbled. The shelf was splitting and cracking underfoot. The whole cliff shook harder than ever. Wearing the Granite Ram made her feel no different, and many of the ledges she had used to get here were gone. But with rocks hailing down from above, and with the rock beneath her tearing away from the cliff, she had no choice but to jump.

She didn't feel the power of the talisman until she sprang, but then it was as though the strength Uraza gave her had been increased fourfold. The leap propelled her farther than she could have hoped. As the shelf tumbled away behind her, she soared an exhilarating distance through the air.

But the jump still wasn't long enough to return to the main ledge, and the other footholds had crumbled. As she began to curve downward, Abeke spotted an indentation in the face of the cliff just large enough that she might find some purchase. Kicking off of the indentation, she gained some height, and with a final push off a meager stone lip, Abeke landed back on the big ledge beside Uraza.

"Incredible," Sylva marveled.

As the wind slackened, the falcon took flight again. Sylva began the dangerous climb down to her bat.

Abeke picked up her bow and turned her attention to Arax. The battle with the ram was moving in her direction. Several people and animals were no longer standing, and Arax fought those that remained with renewed vigor. As Abeke watched, Arax bashed the grizzly bear with his huge horns and sent it sailing off the ledge. The ram barely stopped himself at the brink as the bear plunged out of view.

Then Arax whirled to face her, murderous yellow eyes settling on the talisman around Abeke's neck. With a bellow that shook the mountain, the Great Beast charged straight toward her. Moving fluidly, Abeke sprang to one side, then to the other, but Arax tracked her evasions perfectly. Abeke found her back to the void as the ram closed in, horns lowered to strike.

Roaring with inhuman volume, the bearded man ran forward, wrapped his brawny arms around one of Arax's hind legs, and grabbed hold of it. Skidding to a stop, Arax tried to buck and turn, but the man kept the giant hoof off the ground, his own legs churning forward. Teeth flashing, Briggan attacked another leg. Shrieking, Essix dove at Arax's eyes, talons raking viciously. The huge ram hopped and teetered. With a scream and a huge heave, the bearded man pivoted his body and launched Arax over the side.

The big man fell to his knees as the ram plunged out of sight, following the bear to the valley floor.

Abeke was dumbfounded. Not only had this stranger managed to defeat a Great Beast, he'd just saved her life.

He looked her way, panting. "You . . . you okay, girl?" he asked, holding out a hand to her.

Before Abeke could respond, Zerif lunged forward and stabbed the big man through the back. Abeke screamed, putting a hand to her mouth. The big man pawed weakly at the blade protruding from his chest. The Greencloak with the otter arrived at his side a second later, slashing at Zerif with his sword, but Zerif dodged away, leaving his own sword where it was.

Abeke could hardly believe her eyes. This man, her enemy, had saved her life, only to be rewarded by treachery. A stab in the back. The lowest blow one could deliver. As Abeke drew nearer to her rescuer, Zerif ran to Shane, picking him up. The tall Greencloak got tangled up with an Amayan fighter. The woman's viper struck at him from behind, but the Greencloak's otter bit it just below the head. Though the snake thrashed, the otter refused to let go. A moment later, the tall man clubbed his opponent with the hilt of his sword, knocking her unconscious.

Zerif and the others fled up the rock-strewn slope. He carried Shane over his shoulder, with Shane's saber in his hand. Zerif looked back at Abeke, his eyes frantic. "Hurry! This way!"

Abeke shook her head with a strangely calm certainty. "We're over! I'm not on your side, Zerif!"

At first Zerif looked stunned. Then his eyes became cold and furious. His jackal was with him, uninjured, but Shane's wolverine was limping. Some other survivors had joined them, but they were battered and beaten. All but one lacked their animals. Zerif was out of allies.

Abeke set an arrow to the string of her bow. "Go, or arrows start flying."

After one last withering glare, Zerif turned and started up the mountainside at inhuman speed.

The tall Greencloak turned to Abeke.

"You have the talisman?" he asked.

She took her arrow from the string and fingered the Granite Ram. "Yes."

"And you're with us now?"

"If you want me."

The Greencloak gave a curt nod. "We want you. And we need you. I'm Tarik."

Tarik moved to the side of the fallen bearded man. The Zhongese girl knelt next to him, as did a smaller, balding man with a raccoon. Jhi sniffed the wound where the sword protruded.

"Heal him!" the girl insisted to her panda. "That's what you do, right? Or help me heal him. What should I do?"

"Not all wounds can be healed," the bearded man gasped. "That ram got Jools, but not before my bear gave me one last burst of strength. I've never lifted half so much weight."

Jhi licked the girl, who wept openly. "Save him," she repeated in soft sobs.

The bearded man held the hand of the balding one. "You were the best company a man could ask for, Monte," he said, his voice falling to little more than a whisper. "A real friend." He took a jagged breath. "Don't forget to tell folks I threw a Great Beast off a cliff."

"There will be stories and songs," Monte promised.

"Sorry to leave you early."

"I'll be along by and by," the balding man said, tears falling down his cheeks.

The bearded man looked up at Tarik. As he wheezed, blood dribbled from his lips into his beard. "If it can be managed, dispose of me in a green cloak."

"Nothing would be more fitting," Tarik said.

The bearded man tilted his head back and closed his eyes. Monte leaned close, whispering to him. The bearded man's chest kept hitching in gurgling spasms, then stopped.

"I can't believe he killed a Great Beast," the boy with the wolf said numbly.

"Arax is not dead," Tarik said. "It would take more than a fall, even such a high one. The Great Beasts have too much life in them. Still, if we hurry, we might get away." Though his tone was practical, Abeke thought the man looked very tired. And very sad.

Monte raised his head. "Barlow's gone. I'd rather not leave him here."

"The trick will be getting him to the horses," Tarik said. "We'll manage it."

Uraza snarled in agreement.

"What if they try to ambush us?" the boy with the wolf asked.

Tarik's expression darkened, and he stroked the hilt of his sword. "I honestly hope they do."

THE FALLEN

CONOR LEANED AGAINST THE HIGHEST PARAPET ON SUNSET Tower, looking west, a light breeze ruffling his hair. The tower provided a lofty vantage point, but the mountains where they had confronted Arax were too far away to see. Briggan sat beside him, nuzzling his hand.

They had made it back to Sunset Tower yesterday afternoon. The group had traveled quickly, chased by the constant worry that Arax might catch up with them or that Zerif might stage an ambush. But nobody had troubled them.

Barlow now rested below the surface of a lovely meadow, wrapped in Tarik's cloak. Monte had traveled with them back to Sunset Tower, determined to renew his vows. He hadn't spoken nearly as much on the way back as he had on the way out.

Conor tried not to dwell on certain thoughts. He tried not to picture Barlow or Jools. He tried not to imagine how he would feel if something happened to Briggan. He tried not to guess at all the danger awaiting them, and the other friends he might lose along the way.

Conor stroked the thick fur on the back of Briggan's neck. "I can't believe we're back here. It hasn't been that long, really, but it feels like a lifetime."

The wolf licked his palm. Briggan had only started licking him like that since the battle on the cliff. Conor knelt down and stroked his wolf with both hands.

"Be patient with me," Conor said. "I'll practice with that ax. I stayed alive, and I distracted some of our enemies, but I can do better. Next time you won't have to come rescue me so much."

Briggan nuzzled Conor's forearm.

"That tickles."

The wolf nudged him with his nose.

"What are you doing, boy?"

Briggan stared at him intently.

"Oh," Conor realized. "What do I do?" He had seen the others hold out their arms, so he tried that.

With a flash, Briggan became a tattoo on the back of his forearm. The image burned for a moment, as if his arm had brushed against something scalding. But the searing pain faded quickly.

“I saw that,” said a voice from behind him.

Conor turned to find Rollan coming through the door to the top of the tower, his bandaged arm hanging in a sling. Meilin and Abeke were with him, wearing their green cloaks.

“How long have you been doing that?” Rollan asked. “Were you hiding it to spare my feelings? I don’t need pity.”

“First time,” Conor said, showing him the mark. “Really.”

“Good job,” Meilin said.

“Thanks,” Conor replied, feeling shy. Direct conversation with Meilin tended to fluster him. She was just so . . . incredible. And hard to figure out. “I don’t think Briggan wanted to become dormant while we were out in the open. My guess is he feels safer here.”

“I wonder if Essix will ever feel safe?” Rollan said.

“Give it time,” Abeke recommended.

“Where is she?” Conor asked.

Rollan squinted at the sky. “Where she always is — flying around. She likes it when I let her do her own thing. I can respect that.”

“She’s probably mad because you won’t become a Greencloak,” Conor said.

“No.” Rollan shook his head. “I think she understands. Don’t take it the wrong way. I respect you three for joining. I really do. Especially you, Abeke. You’ve been through so much. But I’m just not sure yet if it’s for me, taking official vows and all that. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll still help out. And who knows, maybe eventually I’ll wear the costume.”

“Now that we made it back here, what comes next?” Meilin asked.

“I guess we train,” Conor said. “We try to be worthy of our animals. And we find the rest of the talismans. At least, that’s my plan.”

“Have you dreamed about any new animals lately?” Rollan asked lightly.

Glancing down at his mark, Conor turned away, gazing out at the countryside. “I think we’ve earned a break.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” Rollan pointed out.

Conor looked down. “Fine. I haven’t mentioned this to Olvan yet, or Lenori either, although she gave me a funny look this morning. I don’t want to worry anybody, and I don’t want to mess up our time to relax, but starting a few days ago . . . I’ve had these nightmares about a boar.”

THE RETURN

OCEANS AWAY, ON THE FAR SIDE OF ERDAS, UNDER A BLACK, impenetrable sky, warm rain drenched a large earthen mound on a barren prairie. Blazing strands of lightning zigzagged across the night, offering brilliant glimpses of the cloud ceiling. In rolling bursts, the roar and crackle of thunder drowned out the patter of the raindrops.

The searing flashes of light revealed hundreds of wombats, perhaps thousands, digging along the edge of the muddy mound, like an army of ants working on their nest. Heedless of the tumultuous storm, they burrowed urgently, paws bleeding.

A lone figure strolled among them, watching them dig in the flickering glare of the lightning. They were close. He could sense it.

In one hand he held the crude key, heavy and carved with animal faces. As promised, it had finally been delivered to him. Years of work would culminate tonight.

The hair was standing up on his neck, on his arms. The air hummed. He took several shuffling steps, then crouched low, put down the key, and placed his hands over his ears.

The lightning struck a short stone's throw away, blasting wombats into the air. The thunder was deafening even with his ears covered. He felt the shock through the ground. The muscles in his legs clenched painfully, but the jolt failed to knock him over.

The next electric flash revealed at least a dozen dead wombats off to his left. The others kept tunneling industriously. It wasn't normal behavior for the animals, but these were not normal wombats. They were in thrall to the presence beneath the mound. He served the same presence, but his devotion was different. At least that's what he told himself.

The figure picked up the key and stood up as the storm raged on. He paced around and around the embankment, the muddy ground sucking at his every step. Eventually, a flash revealed that the wombats had abandoned their duties and massed on one side of the mound.

The figure hastened to that side. As he drew closer, he didn't need lightning to guide him. The key seemed magnetized, drawn toward its destination by an invisible force.

A sharp strobe of lightning revealed the gap in the side of the mound. The wombats hung back reverently. The figure entered the gap and splashed down to his knees as the rain poured down on him.

Holding his breath, the figure plunged the key into the freshly unearthed socket. There came a rumbling, but not of thunder. A tremor rattled from below. He felt it before he heard it, but soon it was as loud as a roar.

The next dazzling blaze of lightning showed the side of the hill tearing asunder. An immense, serpentine form arose, its hood spread, its tongue flicking into the air. Unsure whether he would live or die, the figure bowed down. If his time had come, at least he had accomplished his aim. He had served the presence well.

Gerathon was free.

BOOK TWO:
HUNTED

When the group sets out to find a Great Beast in Eura, they're betrayed by a familiar face. Now the team's hunt for the talisman becomes a race against a powerful enemy.

But the real danger may be the very thing they're seeking....



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Hunted

By Maggie Stiefvater



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In the small light of a lantern, a man and a boy stood and stared at a tiny flask. Although the flask itself was unimpressive, the solution inside was remarkable: a powerful substance that could force a bond between a human and a spirit animal.

“Will it hurt?” the boy, Devin Trunswick, asked. He was handsomely dressed, and there was an arrogant, cruel tilt to his chin that fear couldn’t erase. A lord’s son, he would never admit he was afraid of the dark. Even if there was plenty to be afraid of.

The man, Zerif, pulled back the embroidered blue hood of his cape so the boy could see his eyes more clearly. Holding up the flask, he said, “Does it matter? *This* is a privilege, little lordling. You’ll be a legend.”

Devin liked the sound of that. Right now, he was the opposite of a legend. He came from a long line of Marked individuals — people who had bonded with spirit animals. But when his turn had come, he had failed, breaking a chain that was generations long. At his Nectar Ceremony, the event where children who came of age drank from the Greencloaks’ Nectar of Ninani and hoped for the appearance of a spirit animal, he had summoned nothing.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, his own servant, a lowly shepherd boy, had called up a wolf. A *wolf*. And not just any wolf. The boy had summoned Briggan the Wolf, one of the Great Beasts.

Devin was stung by humiliation.

But that humiliation was going to end. Now an even more powerful animal would be delivered to him. He had prepared his whole life for this — it ran in his *blood*. This destiny had only been delayed, not destroyed.

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“I don’t see what’s funny about it.”

“You’ve tasted the Nectar, right?”

Devin nodded, his face sour despite memories of its exquisite taste.

“Well,” Zerif said, nose scrunching, “you’re about to taste the Bile. Then you’ll get the joke. I promise.”

The boy looked hurriedly over his shoulder as a growl muttered from the trees. Beside him, a spider with a hard, shiny back lowered itself down on a thread. He tried to stay out of its path.

“Whatever animal I call will have to listen to me, right?” he asked. “It will do whatever I say?”

“Bonds with the Bile are different from bonds with the Nectar,” Zerif informed him. “The Nectar might taste sweeter, but the Bile is more useful. *We* can control much more of the process. For instance, you don’t have to worry about bonding with that spider you’ve been so desperate to avoid.”

Devin bristled, annoyed that Zerif had noticed his terror. Loftily, he said, “I’m not worried.”

But his eyes darted to the covered cage that waited for them. Beneath that cloth was the animal he would bond with. He tried to guess what it could be from the size of the enclosure. The cage was large, up to his chest. Occasionally he could hear scratching noises from underneath it.

This was the animal he’d spend the rest of his life with. The animal that would make him triumph.

Zerif handed the flask to the boy. His smile was as wide and encouraging as a jackal’s. “Just one sip will do it.”

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Nobody would ever question him again.

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He remembered the glorious taste of the Nectar, like butter over honey. It had been so remarkable, until it had gone wrong.

Now he raised the flask to his lips, and without another thought, gulped down the Bile. He had to fight hard not to gag — it was like drinking death itself, and the ground that death was buried in. But within that blackness, he felt something coming alive within him — something vast and strong and dark. His body could barely contain the thing that grew inside him. In that instant, he felt no terror. He only felt that he could create terror.

Still smiling, Zerif whisked the cover off the cage.

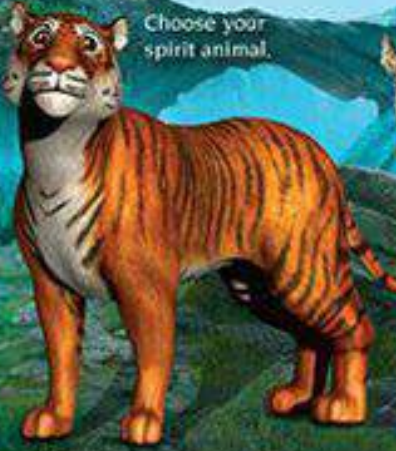
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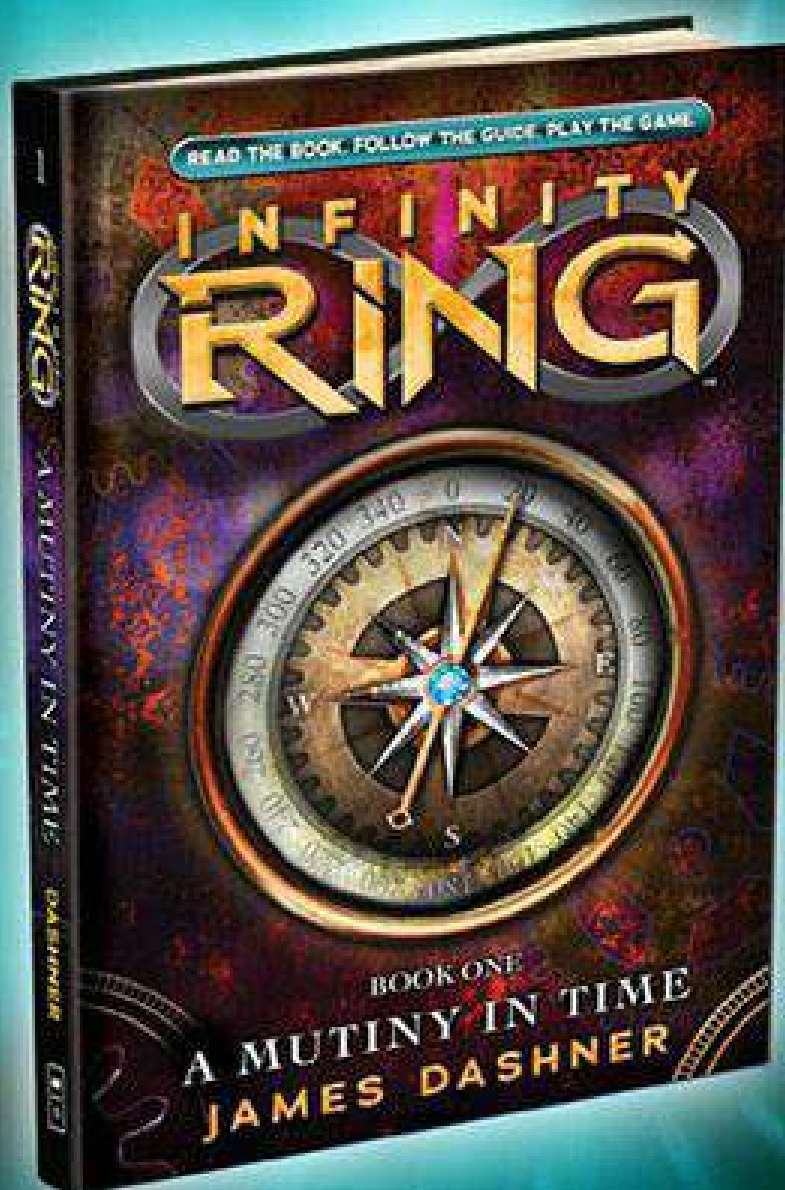
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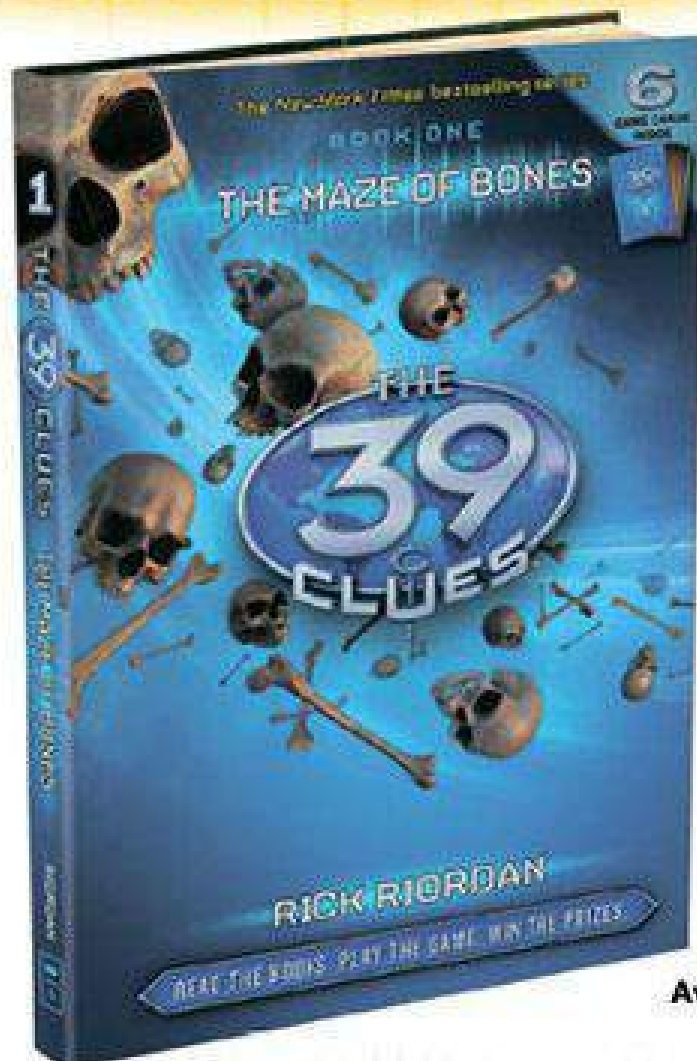
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The Greencloaks

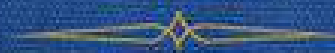


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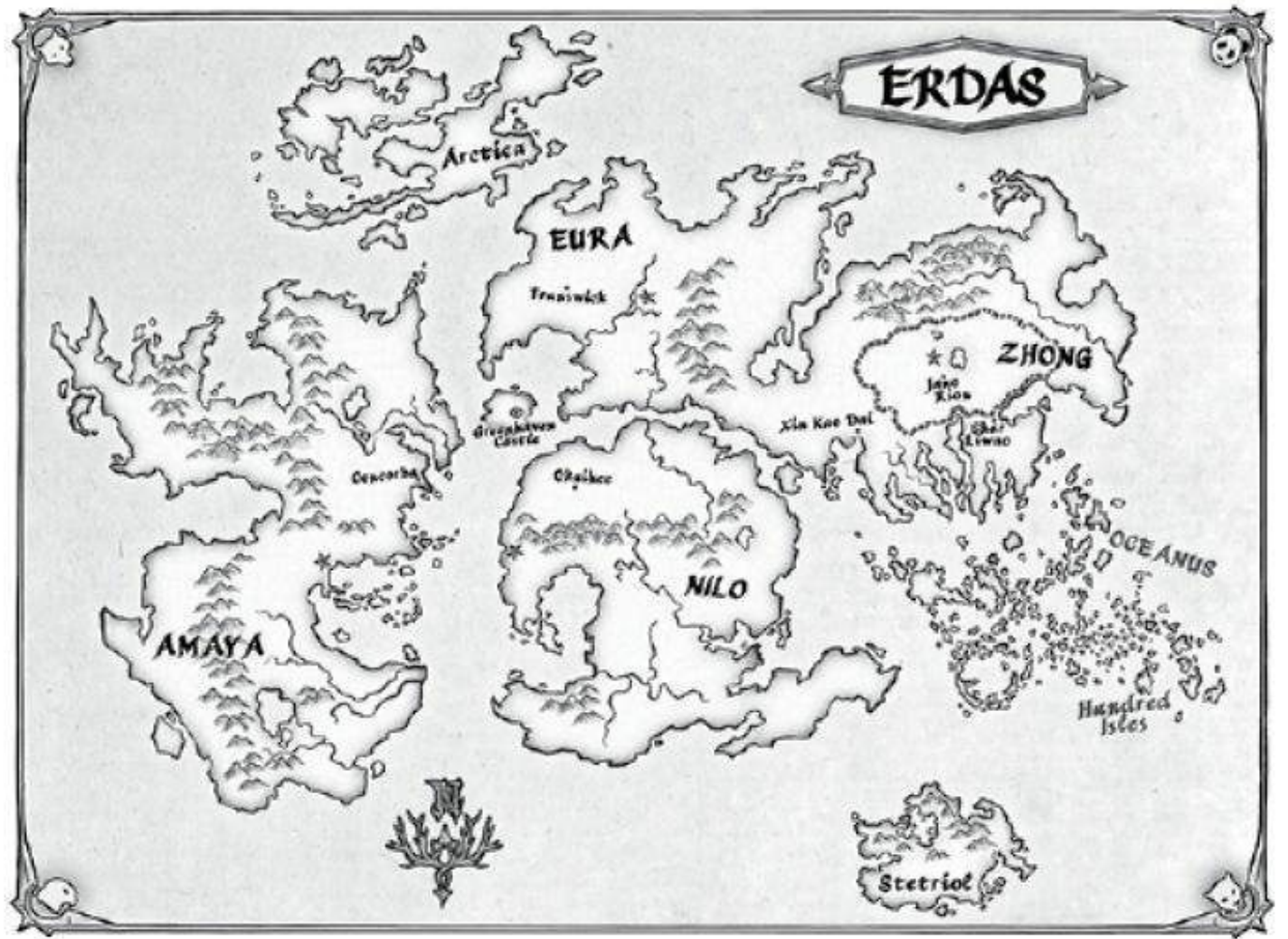
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Maggie Stiefvater



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“I’M NEARLY THERE, URAZA,” ABEKE SAID, slipping a bracelet over her slender brown hand. Her words were directed at the leopard that paced the floor of her room. Because the room was much too small for a leopard, or because the leopard was much too large for the room, the big cat could only take a few steps in each direction before she huffed and twisted the other way.

Abeke could sympathize.

In just a few short weeks, their world had shrunk from their home in wide-open Nilo to a tangled training camp, and then shrunk again to this island fortress: Greenhaven, the headquarters of the Greencloaks, guardians of Erdas. Abeke supposed that the fortress was impressive — a sprawling stone castle built on top of a waterfall — but both she and Uraza were of the mind that the forest surrounding it looked more appealing.

Outside the window, a bell sounded from a distant tower. Three tolls: the call to training.

Uraza paced even harder, making low, grunting sounds.

“All right, we’ll go!” Abeke tightened her bracelet so it wouldn’t slip off. Although its strands looked like wire, they were actually boiled elephant tail hair. Four knots in the strands symbolized sun, fire, water, and wind. Her perfect sister, Soama, had given it to her as she’d left home. It was supposed to bring good luck.

But Abeke wasn’t sure if *good luck* was really what she had been having since she left Nilo. She’d summoned a Great Beast as a spirit animal, which seemed like good luck. But almost immediately after that, she’d been recruited by people who were secretly in cahoots with the Devourer, enemy of the known world. Definitely bad luck.

The Greencloaks had agreed to take her in once she'd discovered her mistake; Abeke knew that she was probably supposed to consider that as good luck. After all, they hadn't had to let her switch sides. But it didn't feel very lucky at the moment. She'd made one friend since this whole thing began — Shane — and he was still on the other side, with the Conquerors. She'd traded her only friend for three kids who didn't trust her.

Really, Abeke would settle for the good luck of not getting lost in the giant Greencloak fortress again.

As she opened the door, she donned the green cloak that meant she had sworn to defend Erdas. The dim hallway was full of sound. A monkey screamed a laugh somewhere out of sight, and a man's voice rumbled low beneath it. A donkey brayed. Something like hoofbeats or pattering footsteps resonated through the stone walls. Abeke ducked as a bird the color of a banana soared overhead.

At the sight of the bird, Uraza, however, leaped skyward with a gleeful and rather threatening growl. The banana-colored bird shrieked. Just before the leopard slapped her paws together, Abeke grabbed her tail. The leopard's leap was brought up short with a yowl.

Uraza spun. For a moment her teeth were instinctually bared and menacing.

Abeke's heart stopped.

Then the leopard realized it was Abeke's hand on her tail. Her lips lowered. She gave Abeke a deeply wounded look. The bird flapped away.

"I apologize," Abeke said. "But that was someone's spirit animal!"

One would think a Great Beast would understand why it wasn't right to eat someone else's spirit animal, but with Uraza, sometimes the beast part outweighed the great part.

"Maybe we should do this," Abeke told Uraza, holding out her arm as a request. All spirit animals had the ability to enter a dormant form. If Uraza chose to enter it now, she would become a tattoo on Abeke's skin until they got to training. And tattoos had never eaten anyone else's spirit animal.

But Uraza was tired of being cooped up. She considered Abeke's outstretched arm for one long moment, and then she turned and stalked down the hall.

Abeke didn't press the issue. They were going to be late. As she hurried down the hallway after the leopard, various Greencloaks waved and greeted her by name. Abeke felt bad that she couldn't return the favor, but they all knew her more than she knew them. All four of the newcomers at the fortress — Abeke, Rollan, Meilin, and Conor — were well-known. The four kids who had somehow summoned the Four Fallen.

Uraza made a curious trilling sound as she leaped down a circular stairwell in front of her. At the bottom, both Abeke and Uraza hesitated. They faced two identical halls, each with plaster-white walls and exposed timber ceilings. Only one led to the training room.

“Uraza?” Abeke asked. Uraza’s violet eyes darted from the floor to the ceiling, her long tail thrashing slowly.

Suddenly, Abeke didn’t think she looked so much like a leopard deciding which way to go. Instead, she looked like a leopard about to —

Uraza lunged. She was a muscled blur of gold and black as she pushed off the wall. A thrumming, heart-chilling growl burst from her. For one moment, Abeke just thought, *What an amazing animal!*

Then she realized that Uraza was on the hunt. The leopard’s unlucky prey crouched on a notch in the plaster wall. It was a small, squirrel-like animal with pink feet, a striped back, and large eyes. Abeke thought it was a sugar glider.

Uraza thought it was delicious.

“Uraza!” Abeke snatched for the leopard’s tail again, but missed. The sugar glider leaped toward the opposite wall. As it flew, its tiny limbs stretched out from its body. There was skin webbing between all its legs, making its body into a furry sail.

Uraza pounced. The sugar glider darted out of her way. The two of them careened down the hall. The sugar glider soared onto a side table. Uraza knocked the furniture over. The sugar glider scrambled up a tapestry of Olvan, leader of the Greencloaks. Uraza clawed the fabric from the wall. Tatters of Abeke’s dignity fluttered to the ground.

Helplessly, Abeke ran after them. She managed to get ahold of Uraza’s back leg, but the leopard tugged free easily. Abeke was left with a handful of black and yellow hairs.

The chase hurtled on. The three of them crashed through the hallway into a small eating room Abeke hadn’t seen before. People filled the benches. Abeke took the long way around the diners as the sugar glider and Uraza tore across the long table. Plates flew. One man got a faceful of his oatmeal. Another diner shut her eyes against an onslaught of fruit.

Outrage had just been added to the breakfast selection.

Abeke felt the Greencloaks’ eyes. She wanted to shout: *It’s her fault, not mine!* But she knew what their responses would be.

It is up to you to control your spirit animal.

Can’t you control her?

This is your responsibility!

This is your failure.

Maybe you don’t belong here after all.

There was no time for her to apologize or clean up the damage. She panted after the animals as they darted and clawed through several twisted hallways and a large room full of chairs, ending up in

a foyer with an arched doorway on the other side. The sugar glider was making panicked, pitiful noises that sounded like a squeaky rocking chair.

Abeke was gasping too. Back in Nilo, she could track animals for hours without feeling she had taken a breath. What was this castle doing to her?

“Uraza,” she said, grabbing a stitch in her side. “We are supposed to be here to *save the world* . . . so save your appetite!”

This made Uraza pause. The sugar glider had just enough time to hurl itself to the safety of the chandelier. Both Abeke and the sugar glider breathed a sigh of relief.

Uraza circled below, but the chase was over.

Now, Abeke thought with dismay, *we are really lost*.

Being lost wasn't the worst consequence either. Being *late* was. Not because it came with a steep penalty — her instructors were fairly understanding. But she knew her tardiness would only deepen the problems between her and the other three kids. They had begun their training together, while Abeke had still been in the clutches of the Devourer. She was not only the outsider, she was the suspicious ex-enemy. She could only imagine what they thought she was doing right now — spying somewhere in the castle. Sending secret messages to Zerif, the Conqueror who'd taken her away after her Nectar Ceremony. Letting Uraza eat someone else's spirit animal.

She had to get to that training room.

Maybe there was someone inside that arched doorway who could help her find her way. Even if the room was empty, there was something tempting about the curved entry. Although it surely led to another room, something about it felt as if it led to the outside instead. Abeke couldn't quite explain the sensation to herself.

Cautiously, she pushed the door open. Inside was a dim room she'd never seen before. It was cluttered with musical instruments, mysterious pieces of art, and mirrors. There was a pile of drums as tall as Abeke, a piano-like instrument the size of a dog, and a bin full of flutes and recorders. A portrait of a girl smiled at her from one wall, while a mural of a man leading dozens of unfamiliar animals through a field covered another. The room smelled like dust and wood and leather, but also, to Abeke's delight, like the outdoors, though, again, she couldn't explain why.

A single man stood inside, partially turned away.

It was possible his spirit animal was in its passive state, but Abeke realized quickly that she wouldn't be able to tell. Apart from his face, every inch of visible pale skin was covered in tattoos: inked mazes, circles, stars, moons, knots, stylized creatures. The mark of his spirit animal wouldn't stand out from the rest of the designs all over his body.

Abeke was suddenly impressed. Whether it was the man's intention or not, he had very cleverly hidden the identity of his spirit animal.

Even though what she could see of his face seemed young, his hair was gray. Nearly white.

He didn't seem to have noticed her silent entrance. His eyes downcast, he continued whispering to himself. Abeke couldn't quite make out the words, but it sounded like coaxing. She suddenly felt like she'd interrupted something quite secret, almost sacred. And in that dim, mirrored room, it was also just a little eerie.

She backed out. She'd find her own way back to training.

In the foyer, Uraza waited, her tail curled tidily around her own feet.

Abeke didn't have to tell the leopard she was upset with her. Uraza knew.

Without a word, Abeke held out her arm. And without a moment's hesitation, Uraza became a tattoo on her skin. It only stung for a second. Abeke started on her way. Back in Nilo she had been known for her tracking skills, hadn't she? She would find the training room. And she would make it her business to not get lost again.



The training room was the second-largest room in Greenhaven Castle. It was bright and inviting and had a dazzlingly tall peaked ceiling for the high-flying spirit animals. One end of the room was devoted to weapons' storage — spears, maces, slingshots. Anything you might hope to find, so long as it would leave a mark. Stained-glass windows lined the walls, each one featuring a different Great Beast.

As she stepped in, Abeke was uncomfortably aware of suspicious eyes on her. Rollan, the scruffy orphan who had summoned Essix the Falcon, frowned at her. Meilin, standing near the panda Jhi, kept her striking face intentionally expressionless. Only Conor, the blond boy with pale skin who had summoned Briggan the Wolf, offered a faint smile in Abeke's direction.

Tarik, the Greencloak who was in charge of their training and their futures, stood in front of a folded fabric screen. His weathered, lean face was only a little lighter than Abeke's. Right now it wore a perplexed frown. "Abeke, didn't you hear the training bell?"

There was no point blaming it on Uraza. She knew what Tarik would say: *You're going to have to learn to work with Uraza in far more difficult situations than our hallways.* And she didn't want to give the others more reasons not to trust her.

Abeke said, "I'm sorry. I got lost." She hurriedly released Uraza from her arm.

"Lost?" Meilin rolled her eyes. She turned to Tarik. "Now can we start? Every minute we stand here doing nothing, a city in Zhong falls to the Conquerors."

"That's a lot of cities," Rollan interjected. "Do you mean eleven cities have fallen while we've

stood here? How many do you think fell during *breakfast*? That was nearly twenty minutes! How —”

“Rollan, that is no joking matter,” Tarik said. “And Meilin is right. Time is precious. But I think it will be more efficient if we train together. Today, you’ll engage in hand-to-hand combat with other Greencloaks.”

Meilin smirked, certain of her abilities.

“I call dibs on the mace,” Rollan said. “And the brass knuckles.”

“Not so fast,” Tarik said. As he spoke, four other Greencloaks entered the room. Though their spirit animals were in passive form, the four newcomers held their arms in such a way to display their tattoos to the four kids — like the Greencloaks were introducing the animals, even though they weren’t physically present. There was a llama, a fruit bat, a lemur, and a mountain lion.

Tarik continued, “You won’t always have access to weapons. In fact, an attack will more often come when you’re not ready — while you’re sleeping or eating. So you will not be using those weapons.”

He pulled aside the folded screen behind him. The wall behind it was hung with frying pans, broomsticks, plates, pillows, and other ordinary objects.

He said, “You’ll be using these.”

“Oh, I did that every day in my old life,” Rollan joked.

“This is ridiculous,” Meilin argued. “Maybe a street urchin is willing to fight with these crude tools, but I could do better with my bare hands.”

Abeke exchanged a look with Conor. They both moved to the wall to get weapons. Neither bothered complaining.

“Grab the first one you come to,” Tarik said. “And when I whistle, change to another object.”

Abeke took a broomstick. Conor took a fork.

“Here,” Rollan said, offering Meilin a handkerchief from the wall. “This one won’t scratch up your noble hands.”

Meilin smiled prettily. Removing the frying pan, she handed it to him. “And here’s one for you. Doesn’t require much brains to figure out how to use it.”

Rollan pretended to bow.

“Everyone to their marks,” Tarik ordered.

They took their places, the other Greencloaks opposite. Abeke faced a middle-aged man with a lemur tattoo and friendly-looking, wide eyes. The sword he held was not quite so friendly looking.

“I’m Errol,” the man said, touching his chest.

“My name is Abeke,” Abeke replied.

He smiled warmly at her. “I know.”

Tarik's voice rose above the introductions. "Older team: Keep your spirit animals in passive form. Younger team: You may use all powers you have at your disposal. The object is to disarm your opponent. And if you manage that, to pin them to the ground."

"For how long?" Meilin asked. "How will we know if we've won?"

"There is no win or lose here, Meilin," Tarik replied. "We don't have time for games. What I want is for you to show me that you can neutralize an opponent so I feel more comfortable putting you in a real-life dangerous situation. Now. Are we ready? Three, two?"

Putting his fingers to his lips, he let out a sharp, piercing whistle. The training battle began.

Right away, Abeke knew that her broomstick would be no match for Errol's sword. So, drawing on her past in Nilo, she hurled her broomstick like a spear. The stick bounced harmlessly off his chest. Grinning at her, he picked it up.

"I'll let you have one free pass," Errol said, offering her the broomstick. In the background, iron clanged and Rollan swore joyously. "But remember that thing doesn't have a point on it. If you tossed it at me in a real fight, you'd just end up empty-handed as I came at you with my blade."

Abeke's cheeks felt warm. "Of course."

"But well-thrown," he said. "Here's a hint: Use that broomstick defensively, and count on your spirit animal as your weapon. And the other way around, if you find yourself with a real weapon."

"Thanks," she said. Then, suspicious of his kind smile, she added, "Don't go easy on me."

"That wouldn't be a favor," Errol said. "We want you prepared when you get out there. Don't go easy on *me*."

Abeke stole a glance at the others. Meilin sat on the shoulders of her opponent, the silk handkerchief wrapped around her assailant's eyes. *If Meilin can do so well with just a scrap of cloth, Abeke thought, I have to be able to work with a broom!*

This time, when Errol came at her with the sword, she used the broom like a long staff instead, blocking his blows as best as she could. His strikes became steadily harder, though, and the broom handle began to splinter.

"Sorry!" Abeke said.

He looked confused. "For what?"

"For this!" With a pang of conscience, Abeke thrust the broom bristles into the swordsman's face. Sneezing, he swatted at the noxious cloud of dust, hair, and animal fur surrounding his head. He blindly windmilled his sword.

Well, he said not to go easy on him.

"Uraza!" Abeke called. "Now!"

Just as Errol's sword split her broomstick in two, shards flying, the leopard pounced. Her paws clapped on his chest. With a grunt, he fell back, catching himself with his hands. His sword clattered away.

Uraza licked a paw serenely.

Errol gave Abeke a thumbs-up from his place on the floor.

Abeke smiled at him. It was nice to feel accepted.

Tarik's whistle sounded.

"New weapon!" he shouted. "Now, this round, I want you fighting as a team. Hurry! Grab something, quick."

Abeke snatched up a heavy wooden mixing bowl. Conor took a spoon. Meilin and Rollan argued over a vase. Meilin ended up with the porcelain bottom and Rollan ended up with the dry flowers inside it.

"Wait —" Rollan said.

Tarik let out his shrill whistle. "As a team, go!"

This time, all four Greencloaks attacked at once, and the four kids moved as one against them. Abeke's wooden bowl served well as a shield. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Conor and Briggan working together, darting forward and back.

Smart, thought Abeke. Conor's been taking his training to heart. He would be prepared even if he was surprised out in the open, with no weapon at all.

In fact, she was awed by their progress. Although he and Briggan had been gradually improving at each training session, this was a huge leap forward.

Suddenly, the older Greencloaks changed tactics, turning to Abeke at the same time. She found herself facing two swords, a spear, and an axe — impossible to hold off on her own, even with Uraza.

Uraza snaked beneath a Greencloak, her flexible body low to the ground. One paw darted out, claws sheathed safely away. The Greencloak with the llama tattoo careened to the ground, unbalanced. Abeke used her bowl to knock back the bat-tattooed Greencloak. Uraza sprang onto his shoulders effortlessly. The weight of the big cat brought him to his knees.

But the success was short-lived. The other two Greencloaks came at her while Uraza was occupied. Errol's sword smacked her bowl right out of her hands. As it flew up into the air, the other Greencloak slammed her with the broad side of his training axe, hard enough to throw her to the ground and knock the breath out of her.

Abeke gasped as her palms scuffed over the floor.

Tarik's whistle shrieked. It sounded a little irritated, louder and longer than usual.

“What was *that*?” Tarik demanded. “This was not a spectator event! Where were you three? How could you let her go down like that?”

Conor had the good manners to look ashamed. Rollan acted like it simply hadn’t occurred to him to help. Meilin’s carefully painted face remained haughty. They didn’t explain themselves, but they didn’t have to.

They don’t trust me, Abeke thought, her eyes prickling with tears. The days of the others’ distrust piled up inside her along with the ache of her scuffed palms and the humiliation of having been so badly beaten. She wouldn’t cry in front of them. Especially not in front of Meilin. She was sure Meilin didn’t cry over anything.

“I’m deeply disappointed,” Tarik said. “Part of good strategy is making good use of all your assets. Abeke is one of your assets, and you should have protected her.”

Conor offered his hand to Abeke. She hesitated before accepting it. He hauled her up.

“Sorry,” he said.

On the other end of the room, footsteps rang out through the uncomfortable silence. It was Olvan, the regal leader of the Greencloaks. As always, his movements were slow and deliberate. There was something imposing about him, even when his spirit animal, a moose, wasn’t visible.

Rubbing his beard, he surveyed the wreckage: shattered glass, broken broomsticks, dried flower petals. “Tarik, I don’t like to interrupt. But this is important.”

“Go ahead,” Tarik said. He was still frowning at three of his four pupils. When he nodded at the four Greencloaks, they nodded back and exited. Errol waved to Abeke as he left. It was kind enough that it made her want to cry again.

“We’ve confirmed that one of the Great Beasts is in the north of Eura,” Olvan said. “Rumfuss the Boar. It’s not a far journey from here. The four of you and the Fallen must travel immediately to find out more. Tarik, you will lead them again.”

“Yes,” Rollan said. “*Finally*. Let’s leave all this cutlery behind.”

Tarik’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know much about the North.”

Olvan seemed unconcerned. “I’ll be sending Finn with you. He’s from that area and can act as a guide.”

“Finn?” Tarik echoed. He didn’t add anything else, but the single word was enough to make Olvan raise a thick eyebrow. It was unlike Tarik to question Olvan.

“Concerns, Tarik?” Olvan asked brusquely. But his tone didn’t seem to encourage a confession. Tarik merely shook his head.

“It will be good to have another set of hands,” Meilin said.

“Finn was once a great warrior, but now he’s seen too much battle,” Tarik answered carefully. “He will only be useful as a scout.”

“But a very good scout,” Olvan insisted. “He will not fight for you, but he will stand by you. There can be no question of that. Here he is.”

Finn entered the room with footfalls much softer than Olvan’s had been. Abeke’s head darted up. At once her humiliation was forgotten, replaced by interest.

Finn was the tattooed man from the mirrored room.

And their lives would soon be in his hands.



3

LETTER

THE FIRST THING CONOR DID TO GET READY FOR THE journey was head to the kitchen. He didn't have a problem existing in dirty clothing or without weapons as long as he had enough food to last the trip. The cool basement kitchen was dug right into the rock foundation of the fortress, and it was very full. Greenhaven required quite a lot of cooks — not only were there a lot of Greencloaks, there were more than a few spirit animals with very strange diets. So Conor tried to grab jerky, crackers, and dehydrated fruit from under elbows and over shoulders and around hips. He had to keep saying, “Excuse me,” and “I’m sorry,” and “Oh, was that your eye?!”

“Oh, love,” said one of the cooks, a woman who looked a lot like a decorative pillow, “we will do that for you. You are too good to be in the kitchen!”

“Oh, *no*,” Conor protested fervently. The kitchen was one of the only places in Greenhaven where he felt remotely comfortable. He came from a shepherd family and, until the last year or so, had grown up in fields. It wasn't the easiest life, but it was simple, and he'd been good at it. He knew his place, and it wasn't this magnificent fortress. This kitchen was closer.

“Oh, *yes*,” the cook replied with a laugh. “You've bonded with a Great Beast! You're destined for greatness!”

With a hint of panic, Conor shoved some more jerky into his pack. The idea that he was destined for greatness was not a cozy one. His former noble employer, Devin Trunswick, would certainly have argued against it.

“Look, the messenger boat's come in!” called an older, bearded cook. Peering out of the small window, he beckoned for Conor to join him. The fortress sat up high above the shore, and though the beach was not close, the building's lofty vantage point let Conor see all the way down to where a

small boat had scuffed onto the rocky sand. In the afternoon light, two messengers climbed out. One walked purposefully toward the castle, but the other began to run, heading for the main entrance of the fortress.

Why run? Conor wondered with a frown. *What is the hurry?*

As Conor watched the two messengers, the cooks took advantage of his distraction to pack his bag full of food, including a large bone for Briggan. A few minutes later, the running messenger disappeared around the side of the fortress, and the other, to his surprise, came right to the kitchen. She had a mailbag. And one of the letters was for Conor.

Conor accepted the letter, trying to keep the shock off his face. He knew very few people who would write to him. Although he was close to his family and their small farming community, none of the peasantry could read or write very well. In all the time he'd served the Trunswicks, he'd only received a single letter from his family. They'd paid a week's earnings to hire the Finley girl, who was training to be a scribe, to scratch it all down. The younger Trunswick brother, Dawson, had read it aloud to him — when he wasn't too busy laughing at the penmanship.

Devin Trunswick was very capable of writing a letter, but it was impossible to imagine him writing one to his former servant. Conor could still remember the open hatred in Devin's gaze as Tarik led Conor away from the crowd during their Nectar Ceremony.

Which was why Conor was surprised to see what looked like Devin's handwriting. It was a little more jiggly and uneven, but the capital letters looked the same.

“Letter from home?” asked the pillow cook. Somehow figuring out from his hopeless expression that he couldn't read it, she added kindly, “Shall I read it to you?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Wiping her hands on her apron, the cook took the letter and scanned to the bottom. “It's from your mother!”

Conor's heart soared for just a moment before crashing back to the earth. It couldn't be true. Conor's mother couldn't read or write.

Dear Conor,

I have wanted to send you a letter for a long time, but as you know, I could not write. Devin Trunswick's little brother, Dawson, has kindly agreed to write it for me. He says he needs the practice with his handwriting anyway. He is a fine boy!

I do not have much time before my evening duties, but I wanted to let you know that we are proud of you. Sadly, things have gotten worse since you left. I have had to take your place as Devin's servant, as our debt to Lord Trunswick was still large when you left. Also, a very cold

spring killed many of our lambs and the wolves have been getting desperate. We lost two of our dogs to them this season. Food is scarce. We must hand over almost everything we earn to the Trunswicks to pay our debt. I do not mean to scare you, but it is hard to make ends meet without your labor. Please ask the Greencloaks if they could send food for us this winter. Surely it is the least they can do for us as you work with them now. I would not ask if it was not dire.

With all of my love, Your mother

P.S. This is Dawson. I am sorry that your family is so hungry. My father will not forgive their debt. I asked him.

Conor didn't say anything. It was bad enough to imagine his mother as Devin's servant, but also to imagine his family starving? He didn't want to picture it, but he couldn't help seeing disaster striking. They had been close enough to it when his father had asked him to go work for Devin. Even as he'd hated leaving for Trunswick, even as he'd wondered why *he* was the sibling who had to go, he'd known that otherwise they would have starved. Suddenly the bag of food he'd packed felt like a luxury.

"I'm sure they'll be all right," said the pillow cook, draping her arm over Conor's shoulders and giving him back the letter. "Giving you up to Briggan is just their sacrifice to save Erdas. You heard what she said! She's proud of you!"

One of the other cooks handed Conor his bag. "As are we," she added. "Now, off with you. Briggan's lad doesn't belong in a kitchen, no matter where he came from."

But if I don't belong in a field or kitchen anymore, Conor thought, and I don't feel like I belong in a castle, then where do I belong?



4

MOON TOWER

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FORTRESS, MEILIN PACED IN THE map room. As she moved around the room, her hands behind her back, she did her absolute best to avoid looking at the three-hundred-pound panda in the room with her. It wasn't that she didn't like Jhi. It was just that looking at her reminded Meilin of precisely everything that was angering her at the moment.

In front of Meilin was a map of Erdas. All the continents were neatly drawn in burgundy ink: Amaya, Nilo, Eura, and Zhong. Someone had lightly drawn in another continent, Stetriol, near the bottom of the map. Meilin put her finger on it. This was where the Conquerors were coming from. Where the Devourer was coming from.

Meilin traced her finger to Zhong. It wasn't very far at all. No wonder Zhong was the first to be attacked.

Is my father still alive? she wondered. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the general's face.

Meilin dragged her finger from Zhong to Eura. It seemed like a much farther distance than Stetriol to Zhong.

Why am I here? she thought furiously. *Why am I not there fighting? And why do I have such a useless spirit animal?*

She wished the others were ready to go. Meilin had selected her weapons and supplies and packed with the efficiency her father had taught her. She wasn't surprised that the others were slower. They probably weren't used to having enough belongings to even learn how to pack.

It felt a little better to be going on a mission, but doubt chewed at her. How was chasing down the other Great Beasts supposed to do anything to help Zhong *now*?

Meilin spun. Jhi sat silently behind her. The black spots around her eyes made her look a little sad. She was so slow. So peaceful. Sure, she had some healing powers, but not enough to save someone mortally wounded. Jhi would be a very useful ally if the Devourer needed to be cuddled to death.

Fury bubbled in Meilin.

The door opened. Immediately, Meilin composed her face. She wouldn't let anyone see her truly upset. Especially not if it was Rollan.

And it *was* Rollan, along with Conor, Abeke, and Finn. They seemed in high spirits, apart from Finn, whose youthful face was as masked as Meilin's. In the lamps of the map room, his gray hair looked nearly white.

"It's a little late to be studying up on geography," Rollan said to Meilin. Essix sailed in behind him, tucking her wings to keep from singeing them on the torches.

"I was bored," she replied stiffly. "I finished packing hours ago."

"Let me guess," Rollan said. "You took a class in it. Four tutors taught you how to fold your clothing."

"For the record, I traveled a lot with my father. I taught myself." Meilin turned to Finn. "Tell me again why our mission is so important?"

Quietly, Finn explained, "If we truly can find Rumfuss the Boar, we might be able to persuade him to give up his talisman. I understand you four retrieved one from Arax the Ram. The Devourer seeks these talismans to use them in the war, and we must beat him to them."

"*If*," Meilin echoed. "If we find the boar. If we persuade him to give us the talisman. What if we don't?"

Finn gave her a very long look. "I don't think we should bank on failure so early, do you?"

Suddenly Tarik flew into the room, cloak swirling, face grim. "I'm sorry to be late, but I have very bad news."

Meilin's stomach lurched. She felt like Tarik was looking at her in particular.

Father!

Sure enough, Tarik's eyes held hers a moment longer. He said, "Zhong has fallen to the Conquerors."

"No . . ." she whispered.

"I'm afraid so," Tarik said. "The capital city has been taken over. And, Meilin — your father is missing."

Meilin folded her arms to hide their shaking. She wanted to cry, but she wouldn't let herself do so in front of the others, all of whom were trying very hard to look at anything but her. Instead, as devastation burned behind her eyes, she shouted, "I should have never come here! There's absolutely

no point to having me along on a — a *treasure hunt* across the globe! I should've been fighting by his side." She shot a poisonous look at Jhi. "And *you* — !" The panda met Meilin's glare with her own gentle gaze, cutting the girl short. Jhi's presence was a painful reminder of home.

All Meilin could think of was the colorful roofs of Jano Rion burning. Zhong fallen! Her father missing!

"Meilin," started Tarik. "I know that this is terrible news, but finding Rumpfuss is really the most helpful step you can take right now."

"I don't believe that!" she snapped. She thought she could feel some sort of emotion coming off Jhi, but she pushed it away. "There's no guarantee that we'll find him, and there's no guarantee that he'll give us the talisman, and even if he does, there are more than a dozen left to go! Zhong needs me *now*."

"You're only one girl," Tarik said. "Here, you're part of a team."

Meilin's cold gaze flitted across Conor, Rollan, Abeke, and Finn. The servant, the orphan, the traitor, and the warrior who had given up war.

Not much of a team, she thought.

"You cannot force me," she said. "I'm going back to Zhong."

"You can't," Conor said, an unbearable concern in his voice.

"Watch me," Meilin shot back.

Conor stuttered, "B-but we *need* you."

"Zhong needs me." Turning to Jhi, she added, "*You* can stay here."

Storming from the room, she slammed the door behind her. She hurried down the hall so fast that the flaming lamps flickered as she passed. She hoped no one tried to come after her. All she wanted was to get her bag and a horse and go. She'd follow the main trade road back to Zhong.

She was nearly back to her room when a hand caught her arm.

"Meilin."

She spun. It was Finn. She didn't know how he caught up to her so silently.

Meilin's expression darkened. Trundling behind him was Jhi. Slower, of course. Not much louder, though.

"You can't keep me here," she said.

Finn tossed her arm away. Almost contemptuously, so she could see how he never intended to physically contain her. In a way, it made her feel better that he wasn't trying to spare her feelings, like Tarik or Olvan might have. She didn't want to be coddled.

He said, "I left a place once in anger. Leaving in anger means returning in regret. I don't want that for you."

I'm not returning, Meilin thought. *So the regret won't matter*. But something about the way he spoke, calm and measured, reminded her a little of her father. So she said, "I'm listening."

"You did your spirit animal a bad turn back there," Finn continued. "Has she ever done the same to you?"

Glancing at Jhi out of the corner of her eye, Meilin felt a little stab of guilt . . . but not enough guilt to change her mind. Out loud, she said, "No! She does practically nothing. The bond was wrong. I'm sure she'd be happier with a different girl." Actually, Meilin thought that Jhi would have been perfect for the girl everyone back in Zhong had *thought* she was. Very few had known about her combat lessons or her interest in strategy. Most saw only the carefully made-up girl who looked so pretty as she strolled in the tea garden or handled the cocoons for silk-making. Jhi would have looked right at home with that public Meilin.

"I don't know if you're so different," Finn said. "Will you come with me? I'll show you something. If it doesn't interest you, you can leave and I won't be the one to stop you."

Meilin reluctantly followed him to a foyer with an iron chandelier, and then through an arched doorway. The room inside was cluttered with dusty mirrors, musical instruments, and objects Meilin saw no use for. It reminded her of all the useless weapons at the morning's training exercise. This room was piled with things that would serve as shoddy weapons. The mess of it irritated her. What was the purpose, she wondered, of a room full of disorganized junk? Even if there was something useful in here, no one would be able to find it.

"What is this place?"

"This is the Moon Tower," Finn said. "It's a place where Greencloaks can form deeper bonds with their spirit animals."

"My bond is fine," Meilin replied crisply. Jhi sat down heavily beside a dusty gong. "She would go into passive form on the first day. Rollan is still struggling."

Finn raised his eyebrows. "I wouldn't compare myself with Rollan. We are our own competition."

Shocked, she said, "My father said that very same thing to me."

"Well then," Finn said with a ghost of a smile. "He must be very wise. Now, this tower isn't for training. It's more like play, or meditation. Sometimes music, art, or logic games will encourage a stronger bond and reveal hidden skills."

Meilin sighed in frustration. "I know her skills. But she's nothing like me."

Finn's expression sharpened. "You do everyone a disservice when you forget who you really are. Is combat all there is to you?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it. The question was maddening in its silliness. "Of course not. But my home has already been taken. It's what Zhong — what my father — needs of me at the

moment!”

“And at the end of all this?”

Meilin raised her hands in a helpless gesture. “We’ll see about that once we get there. If we get there.”

“Take my word on it: That might be too late. Balance, Meilin. Surely your father told you that. Look at this.” He pulled up his sleeve, looking for one tattoo among the tangle of tattoos. Finally, he pressed his finger to a symbol inked between a tangled thorn tree and a collection of pictograms. It was a circle, divided in half with a wavy line. One half was light. The other half was dark.



Meilin was again shocked. “That’s a Zhongese symbol. How do you know it?”

“I was one of the Greencloaks’ greatest warriors. I have been all over Erdas in my time. So you know this symbol?”

Of course she did. “One side is light, one side is dark. One side is active, the other is passive. Day and night.”

“Opposites,” Finn said. “But both part of the same whole.”

Meilin worked hard to quell her indignation. She was getting tired of Greencloaks telling her she needed to make more of an effort to bond — as if she hadn’t been trying. “How does that do me any good?”

Finn gestured to the things around them. “This is a place to find out.” When she still looked unconvinced, he said, “I’m using this room myself. Would you like to hear the story?”

She merely raised an eyebrow in response.

He began, “My final battle was near Zhong, in Oceanus. My brothers and I were ambushing a small band of the Devourer’s allies. There were fifty of them and only five of us, but we had fought worse odds with our spirit animals. Five Marked siblings in one family, yes,” he said in response to Meilin’s puzzled look. “The Greencloaks told us we were *chosen*. I was supposed to accomplish so many great things.” Finn said this last part with a bitter smile that gave Meilin a stab of anxiety. The Greencloaks were saying the same thing about her.

“I was known to be clever with the making of things, so my brothers asked me to build a trap. It was a cunning one, a great pit with young trees bent this way and that over it. Over the top of their flexible trunks, I’d woven in brush with the roots still hanging, so the plants would stay green. When I

was done it looked just like a grassy bank. Just another hill to climb. It was strong enough to support one man, but the trees would give way under the weight of more than one. Then all we'd have to do is wave at the enemy from up above after they'd all fallen through.

“Half of the Conquerors were meant to fall in it before the other half even knew what was going on. But then something went terribly wrong. They discovered the trap — or rather, their spirit animals did. Somehow, all fifty of them had bonded with spirit animals. That's impossible, but they had. So it was not only fifty Conquerors, but fifty Conquerors aided by fifty spirit animals.”

Meilin made a soft noise of disbelief — bonding with spirit animals was so rare that it was hard to imagine fifty Marked individuals in one place, outside of the Greencloaks.

But Finn's face was serious. “You doubt it. I doubted it myself. Like I said: impossible. But *you're* also impossible. No one can summon a Great Beast, and yet the four of you have. It seems we have entered impossible times.”

Meilin inclined her head. True enough.

Finn continued, “The spirit animals discovered the trap easily, making it useless. There's nothing dangerous about a hole no one falls into. My brothers and I tried to hold them off, but it was no use. There were too many of them. Imagine if you can, Meilin: fifty spirit animals. Animals we'd never seen before. Rhinos. Cougars. Anacondas. Scorpions. My brothers were slaughtered. It was — I barely . . . My youngest brother, Alec, distracted them so I could get away.

“Recovering has been difficult. It was horrific. Not just for me, but for my spirit animal, Donn. I nearly lost him. During the battle, he entered the passive state and now he will not come back out.”

Meilin's eyes were wide. “Your brothers. That's terrible. And your spirit animal . . . I didn't know that could happen.”

Finn looked around the Moon Tower. “My spirit animal, Donn, and I had a very difficult bonding. I lived in a very remote village and the Nectar didn't make it in time — I was the only child of age and the Greencloaks found me too late. The Moon Tower helped us to find a measure of peace. I know it will help us again.”

Meilin said, “I want to ask a question, but it might be rude.”

Finn smiled a tiny smile. “I won't be offended. There's not much that can hurt me in this world anymore.”

“Was your hair always that color?”

Now Finn smiled ruefully as he patted the crazy gray-white spikes. “No. It changed after the battle. I woke up and my hair had gone completely white. Now — will you try to connect with Jhi here in the Moon Tower?”

Slowly, Meilin nodded. She didn't think it could really change her mind, but after his terrible confession, she felt she owed it to him to try.

"What's the right way to do this?" she asked.

"It's play," Finn said. "There is no right way."

Meilin had never been a playful child. There had always been combat to train for, languages to learn, skills to conquer. There might have been time for play, but she hadn't been interested. *Play* had never changed the world.

She took another look around the room. Before, she had found it disordered and useless. But with deeper examination, she saw a kind of organization. Drums gathered near paintings that had to do with earth and objects made of leather and wood. String instruments were near metal sculptures and mirrors and paintings of water. Woodwinds, paper objects, and anything having to do with air seemed to be grouped together.

Somehow this made her trust the room's purpose more. She had been educated in the usefulness of the arts. She would never be convinced there was a purpose for chaos.

Her eyes landed on an erhu, a traditional instrument from Zhong. She had received hours of lessons, but it had been months since she'd played. Taking up the bow, she crossed back to Jhi. Standing this close, Meilin could feel the heat radiating from the panda's body and smell the wet bamboo scent of her coarse fur.

Jhi rolled her gaze toward Meilin.

"I'm trying," Meilin said. "I'll try if you'll try."

Feeling a little foolish, she began to play. At first, she could only remember her instructor correcting her finger position and her bow technique. But after a few measures, she began to feel something else. A wide-open peace. Meilin knew that the emotion was coming from Jhi. This was part of the panda's power. Ordinarily this was where Meilin lost patience — she had no interest in being calm.

But she had promised Jhi she would try. Slowly the peace focused.

A very strange thing happened then. Meilin imagined she was surrounded by small, floating planets. Tinier moons circled some of them. She knew in a fuzzy, dreamy way that these orbs were her options. As the erhu sang sweetly in the background, Meilin realized that the closest little sphere represented the path back to Zhong. It was certainly the closest option, but it was also the smallest. And there were no other moon-choices floating around it.

With her decisions hovering outside of her mind, it was easy to tell that her plan to return to Zhong was logical, but reactive. And it was easy to see too that it left her with nowhere else to go.

Jhi's power kept pushing at Meilin. She glimpsed the orb that represented the choice of going in search of Rumpfuss. It was a troubled, stormy planet, but it was surrounded by more choices, and each of those was surrounded by even more. It wouldn't be an easy choice, but it had more possibilities close by.

Meilin strained her neck to see it closer. Suddenly, in one of the orbs, she saw her father's proud face. *You've made the wise decision, he said, instead of the smart one. Well done.*

Meilin stopped playing all at once. The mysterious orbs vanished. Jhi blinked quietly at her.

"What happened?" Finn asked. Meilin had forgotten he was there.

Meilin didn't know how to explain it. The panda had helped her to *think*.

"I made a decision," she said. "I'm going with you."



IT STARTED TO RAIN. IT RAINED AS THEY FETCHED HORSES FROM the stables. It rained as they left Greenhaven Castle. It rained while they loaded supplies onto the boat to Eura. It rained as the ship shoved off from the pier and into the storm-gray water.

It rained on everyone, but it especially rained on Rollan. He didn't get along with boats, so he stood at the railing and tried not to focus on his churning insides. He could bear being drizzled on if it meant he didn't throw up on anyone. Essix found a perch on one of the masts, looking a little unsettled herself. Stuffing her head under her wing, she quivered sickly.

It was strangely quiet; he could hear the rain falling on the ocean. Although the ship had sails, they were tied tightly away on the masts. He couldn't quite work out what propelled the ship. Far up ahead, though, he saw two odd waves breaking again and again. Water pushed by the ship's hull, maybe? It didn't seem very likely.

"Whales." Abeke's clipped voice startled him as she joined him. The rain dribbling down her nose matched the rain dribbling down Rollan's. Uraza sauntered behind her, ears pinned in the damp, tail thrashing.

"Whales what?"

Abeke pointed. "Rockback whales. They're pulling the ship."

She indicated the odd waves. Now that Rollan focused on them, he could tell that they were indeed whales, not water. The beasts were as mottled gray and black as the stormy sea, and their spines were studded with stones and boulders. Like moving cliffs just beneath the water. They must have been longer than the ship itself.

Rollan was deeply impressed, but would have never admitted it out loud.

He asked, "How did you know?"

She didn't seem as if she wanted to answer, but she pressed her lips together and replied, "When I accompanied the Conquerors to look for the first talisman, we traveled in a ship like this. I'd never seen anything like it. There is not much opportunity to travel by ship in Nilo, much less a rockback-whale ferry."

For a few minutes, they both watched the rocky backs rise and fall. In the eerie hush, one of the whales called to the other. It was a hollow, echoey sound that seemed both very close and very far.

"Wow," Abeke breathed.

"Creepy," Rollan corrected. "Speaking of creepy, let's talk about those Conquerors."

It wasn't the most tactful way to bring it up, but Rollan wasn't really known for his tact.

Abeke raised an eyebrow but said nothing; it was hard to say if she was hurt by his words or hiding something. Rollan glanced toward the mast where Essix perched, her head still beneath her wing. Her intuitive power would have come in handy right about now, but she showed no signs of helping out.

"Well, you were fighting for them and all," Rollan said. "I figured you might have the inside track on all things Conqueror."

"I already told you how it happened," Abeke replied stiffly.

"Tell me again. I love happy endings."

She sighed. "Rollan, don't you remember what it was like when you called up Essix? Was she what you expected?"

Of course she hadn't been expected. Rollan hadn't been expecting much of anything, as he had been sitting in a prison at the time, and in prison, disappointment was generally the most practical thing to expect. And even if he hadn't been incarcerated, he couldn't have expected Essix to appear. Nobody called up Great Beasts.

"Sure," Rollan replied easily. "Miracles happen to me all the time."

Abeke made a face. She touched the tuft of coarse fur at Uraza's shoulders, as if for comfort. "Don't you remember how uncertain everything was? Nobody knows if they are going to call up a spirit animal at all. And the rituals make it so nerve-racking. Everyone is looking at you. There is so much pressure."

"I didn't have a ritual," Rollan said. "I had a homeless guy and a rat. But I get the idea."

Abeke stopped. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Actually, I don't. That's basically the beginning, middle, and end of it, anyway: homeless guy, rat, magical falcon. Happy ending. Told you. I love those things. Go on with your story."

She said, “My ritual was very well attended. We desperately needed rain, and there was hope that a new rain dancer would be named. Then, all of a sudden I had a spirit animal, and it was a *Great Beast* and then it began to rain! My father had never looked at me like that before. My sister had never looked at me that way before — *no one* had. Everyone thought I was the new rain dancer. I was still trying to understand that I’d summoned a spirit animal! And then in the middle of the commotion, Zerif appeared and told me that he needed me to help save the world. Maybe you would have done better, Rollan, but during all that, I really didn’t think to ask him, *Are you telling the truth?*”

Rollan thought back to his own summoning. Zerif had appeared not long after Essix had. But Rollan *had* doubted him. And then taken off running.

To be fair, that was how Rollan approached most situations in life. He’d pulled the same stunt for the Greencloaks too: doubt and run. Never a *bad* plan.

Abeke broke in ruefully, “You did ask him, didn’t you? Or at least, you didn’t trust him.” When he looked at her, surprised, she added, “I could tell by your face. You were thinking I was foolish to go with him.”

“A fool’s better than a traitor.”

Very serious, she nodded. “Rollan, I want you to know that I won’t let the Greencloaks down.” *I’m not a Greencloak*, he thought. But he didn’t say it out loud.

Instead, he watched Uraza slink damply after Abeke as they retreated to the ship’s cabin. After they had gone, Essix flapped down to join him, her talons tight on the wet wood.

“Thanks for your help back there,” he told her. “What do you think about her?”

Essix stretched out a leg and chewed on one of her talons.

“That,” Rollan said, “is exactly how I feel about it.”



It kept pouring. Once they made landfall, they transferred the supplies to the horses and set off through the damp evening. Technically, the horses were supposed to be a privilege. A way to make the long journey faster and more agreeable.

But practically, Rollan wished they were walking. Neither he nor Essix got along with his horse. For starters, Rollan wasn’t the best of riders. Life as a street urchin hadn’t exactly prepared him for hours in the saddle. Back in Concorba, if he’d wanted to go somewhere, he’d gone on the bottoms of his own two feet. It was only because of their last mission that he’d had any experience on horseback at all. In fact, after that ride across Amaya, he still had blisters in all kinds of places where blisters shouldn’t be.

Also, his horse was a terrible animal. Terrible to look at, with its flecked gray coat, and terrible to be around, with its habit of biting Rollan. If he relaxed his hold on the reins at all, the creature would

bend itself almost in half to nip at his legs. It hated Essix too. If the falcon got anywhere near, the horse would rear and snap toward the bird.

“Maybe it’s hungry,” Conor suggested as they rode side by side through the drizzle.

“Hungry for human flesh, maybe,” Rollan replied.

Overhead, Essix cried out; the horse pinned its ears back angrily. “Falcon flesh too.”

“If you treat him with respect, he’ll treat you with respect,” Tarik called.

Easy for him to say, Rollan thought as Tarik and Meilin began a conversation about the pleasures of being taught horseback riding before one could walk.

After a few hours, Rollan was wet to the skin. His scruffy hair stuck to his forehead. The rolling, treeless countryside was already soaked green and black. Even if they’d wanted to stop, there was no shelter.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “this reminds me of home.” He’d spent countless evenings on the streets, pressed against a wall, barely out of the rain. Stomach growling, always hungry.

Well, at least now his stomach was full.

“Too tough for you?” Meilin asked sweetly. Her black hair was slicked on either side of her face.

“Oh, no,” Rollan replied. “I’m great at being cold and wet. One of my finest skills.”

Meilin shot back, “Did you have tutors for that?”

“I taught myself.”

She smiled at that, then hid it, fast. But Rollan had already seen. *Ha! Score one point for me.*

He was a little worried at how much he was getting used to *not* living on the streets, actually. He still hadn’t made up his mind over whether or not he wanted to work with the Greencloaks permanently, but if he left now, he’d have to get used to being hungry and dirty and mostly dead all over again. Just a few weeks ago, all he’d cared about was whether or not he’d get to eat once every three days. Now he had stopped worrying about meals and was instead concentrating on getting a smile out of a snotty general’s daughter.

Slippery slope, Rollan, he reminded himself. *Don’t forget how to be on your own.*

“It will be better once we get in the trees,” Tarik said, gesturing to a small copse of oaks ahead.

“We’ll need to be on our guard,” Finn spoke up, the first thing he had said since they mounted the horses. “Eura is not as safe as it once was. You all should remember the lessons you learned in training before we left.”

The main lesson Rollan had learned in training was that Meilin was dangerous with a handkerchief.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Rollan’s horse stopped in its tracks and tried to take a bite out of his leg.

“No way!” he told it, jerking the opposite rein. “That’s my favorite leg.”

From down the road, Tarik said, “Your horse used to be a spirit animal. His human fell in battle. That’s why he’s so irritable.”

Rollan worked to save his favorite leg and then the other one. “Pretty shoddy reason.”

Abeke said thoughtfully, “I hear it’s unbearable if the bond is broken.”

“It’s true,” Tarik said. “As you four know, the bond is a powerful thing, and it gets stronger the longer you’re together. To lose your bonded partner is like losing a limb.”

Rollan’s horse made another grab at him. Yellow teeth snagged fabric and narrowly missed bone.

“I’m right on track to know what that feels like,” he muttered.

“Do you think the horse is jealous of Rollan and Essix’s bond?” Abeke asked.

There was not a lot to be jealous of. Essix would come to Rollan in a pinch, but they both seemed to be loners. Rollan couldn’t figure out a way to get through to the falcon — or even if he really wanted to. He’d gotten along fine before she came along, and he figured he could probably manage fine after too. He guessed she felt the same way about him.

Tarik lifted a shoulder. “Possibly. Or it could just remind him of what he once had.”

Rollan twisted to look at Abeke. Her bond with Uraza seemed pretty great. The leopard followed her as if the two of them were thinking the same thoughts. Wanting the same things. With Essix, Rollan felt they wanted the same thing about as often as any bird and boy would . . . which wasn’t much at all.

Tarik’s horse spooked, hooves stamping and scraping on the ground. Rollan couldn’t immediately see what had startled it. Then he glimpsed a small, furry animal scurrying up the horse’s side. Tarik swiped at it with a surprised, hoarse laugh. He called out, “It’s a weasel!”

Rollan curled his lip. He hated weasels more than his horse. They were like rats, but longer. Like snakes, but furrier.

“What’s going on up there?” Finn asked from his position at the rear.

“I’ve got it under control!” Tarik called back, swatting at the biting and clawing animal. It looked like he was being attacked by a scarf. Behind him, Conor and Abeke clearly couldn’t decide if they were allowed to laugh.

The weasel lunged for Tarik’s eyes. Tarik blocked the animal — barely. His horse reared again.

Suddenly a surge of intuition jolted through Rollan, certain and overpowering and ferocious. His eyes found Essix in the sky without having to search for her. The falcon’s gaze was fixed on him as well. This was one thing they had in common: an uncanny ability to read people and situations. And when they worked together, the connection was — well, it was easy to see why Essix was called a *Great Beast*.

Now Rollan knew the truth as clear as if someone had shouted it to him.

Something was wrong.

This was an ambush.

“Watch out!” he shouted. “It’s a trap!”

Finn scanned the woods, his expression sharpening. “Conquerors! Arm yourselves!”

Two men plunged out of the brush, a fox on their heels. In a decisive move, one seized the bridle of Finn’s horse and the other threw himself at Tarik. Lumeo, Tarik’s spirit animal, an otter, twisted suddenly out of his dormant form. A third man charged from the trees, a badger on his heels.

Rollan’s stomach dropped.

These new animals were no ordinary animals.

They were spirit animals.

Conquerors’ spirit animals.

“Don’t just stand there!” Meilin ordered, voice clear and ringing. “Attack!”

Rollan realized he had been frozen by the chaos. Up ahead, Tarik jumped off his horse and drew a knife against his human attacker, even as the weasel dug its teeth into his shoulder. The Conqueror easily avoided Tarik’s knife — the bond between him and the weasel was giving the man superhuman agility. More Conquerors emerged — too many to count. Everything was a mess of people and spirit animals. So many spirit animals.

Rollan kicked his horse to get closer to the fray. The action promptly caused the horse to swing its head to snap at him.

“No!” he said furiously. “You grass-burning chump! Look! They’re in trouble! Go that way!”

The horse bucked. Rollan clutched its neck to keep from flying off. Briggan loped by him, Conor close to his heels, dagger in hand. Abeke was right behind, wielding a large tree branch like a weapon as Uraza pounced. They all looked gloriously useful.

Overhead, Essix cried out. In falcon language, it clearly meant *Do something!*

“I’m *trying!*” Rollan said. “Where’s your sense of loyalty, horse?!”

The horse reared. This time, Rollan slid right off the back of his rain-slick saddle. Both his pride and his tailbone shouted angrily as he landed. The horse was gone faster than you could say *traitor*.

He clambered to his feet. Essix swooped low to see if he was okay.

At least somebody is loyal around here, he thought. He gave her a thumbs-up. He didn’t know if she understood. Falcons didn’t have thumbs.

Two other Conquerors were closing in on Tarik. One of them was bald and had a snake wrapped loosely around his arm. The other was dramatically mustached and had a small cat at his feet. As Tarik parried their blows with astonishing precision, Lumeo pounced on the cat in a chaos of fur and

tooth. The cat's Conqueror was momentarily distracted and Tarik took advantage of this, delivering a roundhouse blow to his foe's midsection. The Conqueror stumbled back into Tarik's horse, who delivered a kick of its own, knocking the attacker unconscious. The cat fled to the woods.

Conor and Briggan were holding off the Conqueror who'd been joined by the badger — the man seemed to weaken as soon as Briggan got the badger clamped in his jaw. Finn stood in the shadows, head bowed, holding his side tightly. He seemed to be fighting a battle that existed behind his own closed eyes. The Conquerors hadn't noticed him yet. Close by, Meilin had been drawn farther away to fight with two other Conquerors. When Abeke approached with her tree branch to give aid, Meilin shouted to her, "I don't need *your* help!"

Abeke looked shocked, but she wasn't deterred. She leaped to rescue Finn as a Conqueror discovered him. It wasn't ideal, but Meilin, Abeke, and Finn looked like they were handling themselves. Tarik, on the other hand — he faced not only the persistent weasel, but also the bald Conqueror with the snake wrapped around his arm.

Rollan ran toward him. The weasel scrambled up Tarik's face. In that moment, the bald Conqueror tossed the serpent. Blinded by the weasel, Tarik didn't immediately understand this new threat.

"Tarik!" Rollan shouted. "It's the snake!"

The Greencloak's hands tightened around the serpent. Too late. The snake's fangs sank into his arm. Tarik shook off the weasel and ripped the snake from himself, but he staggered. In this moment of vulnerability, the bald Conqueror raised his sword, about to deliver a killing blow.

There wasn't enough time for Rollan to reach him before the sword fell.

"Essix!" he yelled. Surely she would come through for him when it was really important.

The falcon dove, claws outstretched. She landed on the enemy's bald head a moment before he swung the sword. As the Conqueror flailed, nothing but feathers in his view, Rollan scrambled to seize the man's sword.

"Get it off of me!" the man screamed. His eyes were shut tight; Essix's talons were inches away from them.

Rollan clutched the sword threateningly. "If I do, will you leave us alone?"

"Anything!" the man said. "Trust me!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Rollan glimpsed the snake slither into the bald Conqueror's open hand.

"Unfortunately for you," said Rollan, "I don't trust anyone."

The Conqueror threw the serpent forward, but Rollan was ready. He swung the sword. The heavy blade sliced the snake neatly in two and kept on swinging.

Right into the Conqueror's leg.

Both Rollan and the bald man howled — the Conqueror in pain, Rollan in surprise. It was the first time Rollan had ever struck a human with a proper sword, and unbelievably, no one had been around to notice it. *Well, except Essix*, Rollan thought as the falcon flapped into the air with a dry, approving cry. He gave the falcon a hasty one-finger salute as he spun to deal with the remaining spirit animal. The weasel, however, had slunk into the trees. It must have been looking for its human partner.

The Conqueror continued wailing.

“Don’t move a muscle,” Rollan warned, sword still pointed at him. “You try to slither your way out of this one, you might lose something precious to you — like your life.”

A cry pierced the air from where Conor had been fighting his foe. Without removing the sword’s tip from his prisoner, Rollan glanced toward the commotion. Briggan held a Conqueror’s spirit animal in his jaws — the badger Rollan had seen earlier. The Conqueror watched anxiously from the edge of the woods. With a growl, the wolf opened his jaws; the badger fell lifeless to the ground.

The Conqueror threw up his arm, trying to call the badger back to him. Nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. No tattoo would form. The man let out an anguished cry. No one moved against him as he shifted to claim the badger. Without even a glance for the others, he disappeared with it into the forest.

Conor did not follow. There was a curious sadness in his face.

Rollan was unsympathetic. The Conqueror should have known: Don’t bring a badger to a Great Beast fight.

Rollan turned his attention to Tarik, whose clothing was tattered and bloodstained.

“It looks worse than it is,” Tarik muttered, teeth clenched in pain.

“That snake —” Rollan began.

“A Euran adder. I need to get the herbal antidote for the venom. Unfortunately, it will only get worse.”

This sounded alarming to Rollan. “Have you been bit before?”

Tarik answered calmly, “No. But I have seen others.”

“Can you walk?”

The Greencloak winced. “Is my horse gone?”

Nearby, Conor nodded grimly. Gone. In fact, aside from the Conqueror’s groans, which Rollan thought were uncalled for, the forest had fallen uneasily silent.

Rollan called out for Meilin, Abeke, and Finn.

There was no reply.

“Where’d they go?” he asked Conor.

Conor pointed. “The others galloped that way. But we’d never catch up. Our horses are gone.” Even Tarik’s well-behaved steed had vanished, spooked by the combat.

“Well, this is a grand adventure,” remarked Rollan. “Three missing and one chewed on. What do we do now?”

With a grimace, Tarik pushed himself onto an elbow. In a low voice so that the Conqueror couldn’t hear, he whispered, “There’s a Greencloak near here. An old informant. I think that’s the best place to go. Finn knows her, and she will have the antidote. I’m afraid you’ll have to help me walk, though.”

Conor and Rollan each took one of Tarik’s arms and hauled him up. Lumeo stood by his side, his coat uneven and sodden from the fight in the damp underbrush. His normally playful expression was keen, trying to anticipate what Tarik might need from him.

“It’s all right, old friend,” Tarik said to his spirit animal. He was shivering in an alarming sort of way. “Don’t worry.”

“Do you think the others are okay?” Conor asked. “You said Finn was just a scout. He doesn’t fight, does he?”

“But Meilin does,” Tarik said. “Very well, as we keep finding out. And Finn still has his wits. I am optimistic. But we’d better get going. It’s not far. But with me like this, it will probably feel that way.”



Tarik tried to be valiant, but it was clear that his condition was darkening with the evening. By the time night had fallen, he was quivering and clammy. Rollan wondered just how fast this antidote would work.

Finally, Tarik breathed, “There. There it is.”

Conor exclaimed, “That’s a castle!”

Rollan squinted at the single tower, gray and ghostly in the rainy dark. There was only one very short door and no discernible window openings. It looked like the sort of building an unimaginative child would build. “If it’s a castle, where’s the rest of it?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Tarik said. “Help me down the path.”

At the small door, he did a complicated knock.

Nothing happened.

He did it again. He told them, “Sometimes she pretends to be deaf.”

The door opened. An old woman, tiny and as wizened as an ancient fruit tree, stood on the other side. She said, “I *am* deaf.”

Rollan and Conor exchanged a look behind Tarik’s head.

“Tarit,” croaked the old woman. She had a voice like wood shavings. A faded green cloak hung on

a peg just beside the door, but it looked as if it hadn't been moved for quite a while. "It's been a long time."

"Tarik," corrected Tarik.

"That's what I said," she replied. "There seems to be less of you than last time I saw you."

"A snake and a weasel ate the rest," Rollan said. "A Euran adder, to be precise. I'm not sure what kind of weasel."

The old woman noticed Conor and Rollan for the first time. "And two new Greencloaks, I see." Really, her voice sounded more like someone eating pebbles.

"One," corrected Rollan. "By which I mean, not me."

"Lady Evelyn," Tarik said faintly. "These are the ones you must have heard about. The children who summoned the Fallen Beasts."

The lady eyeballed them closely. It was not an entirely comfortable experience. She had a little bit of a mustache. Just a few white hairs. Rollan tried not to stare.

"Oh, no, Tarin, you must be mistaken," she crackled. "There are four of *those* children. This is certainly only two."

"*Tarik*," he corrected again. "There was a scuffle on the road. We have lost touch with the other two for the moment."

"You lost half of the Fallen? That seems careless," the old woman — Lady Evelyn — said. Now her voice was more like stepping on a very large beetle. "Well, come in before you lose another half."

Inside the tower was the opposite of the grand Greenhaven Castle. Straw covered the floor. Threadbare tapestries hung over the narrow window slits to keep the wind out. Something thin and gray boiled in a pot hanging over the fire. Circular stairs led up to nowhere. Rollan could see clear up into the blackness that must be the top of the tower; Essix had already soared up there to explore.

"I know what you're thinking, not-a-Greencloak," Lady Evelyn said. She was already puttering around in a collection of glass bottles and dried herbs, fingers searching across the cluttered windowsill. "Not a very pretty castle, that's what you're thinking. It wasn't meant to be pretty. It was just a place to keep cattle after you stole them."

"Who steals *cattle*?" Conor asked.

She cackled. "Who doesn't?"

"Me," he said.

Turning, she sniffed him. "Ah, you're a shepherd's son, though. You're a guardian, not a thief."

Conor, surprised at her intuition, sniffed his wet sleeve as if he possibly still smelled like his old life.

A soft whicker interrupted them.

“Ah,” said Lady Evelyn. “This is my spirit animal, Dot.”

Rollan grimaced. Another horse. Dot was a sway-backed black-and-white miniature horse the size of a dog. She also had a bit of a mustache. Just a few white hairs.

He whispered to Conor, “It’s the opposite of a Great Beast.”

Lady Evelyn chose that moment to be deaf. She instead knocked several plates and scrolls off the table and said, “Why don’t you lay Tarbin down here, so I can get to mending him? You boys can dry off by the fire and help yourselves to dinner.”

The boys hesitantly stripped off their cloaks to dry by the fireplace and peered into the bubbling cauldron. Every now and then, something white and shapeless would boil up to the surface and then descend into the gray liquid again. Conor whispered, “I don’t know if that’s food or laundry.”

Rollan’s stomach growled. It didn’t care. “I ate my fair share of laundry on the fine streets of Concorba.”

Conor poked it with a ladle. He scooped something brown and stringy from the bottom.

“Food,” Rollan declared. “Laundry is never stringy.”

Conor didn’t seem eager to sample it. Apparently shepherds’ sons had more refined palates than street urchins. Rollan tried the stew, or whatever it was. It tasted like a puddle in the bad part of town.

“How is it?” Conor asked.

“Delicious.”

Conor looked over to where Lady Evelyn was ministering to Tarik.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?” he asked.

Rollan didn’t want to lie. So he answered, “I don’t know.”

They ate in silence for a short time. Tarik was not entirely successful in stifling his pain. Eventually he quieted too. Neither Rollan nor Conor was sure of what this meant.

“Greencloak boy,” Lady Evelyn ordered from behind them. “And not-a-Greencloak boy. I need to talk to you. About your quest.”

They joined her at the table.

“Taril is fine now,” she told them in a low voice. “I gave him something to help him sleep. He will recover. But it will take some time. He is lucky the serpent didn’t strike closer to his heart. As it is, the venom will be hard to counteract. He will need constant rest and even more constant attention. Luckily, I never rest and am constantly attentive. However, he won’t be able to travel with you.”

“What?!” Conor cried. Both he and Rollan peered at Tarik. Though their mentor’s face was more peaceful now, his skin looked strange and slack, and his lips were oddly parched. His breath came

unevenly and his fingers still shook with the tremors Rollan had felt on the journey here. It was obvious he'd used the very last of his strength bringing them all here.

Rollan struggled with how to feel. Since he wasn't a Greencloak, he technically didn't owe Tarik any allegiance. But still — Tarik had trained him and protected him; he'd never been anything but kind to Rollan, even if Rollan wasn't sure if that was only because of Essix. It was difficult to see him like this. Utterly vulnerable. So close to death.

“He tells me another elder Greencloak — Fonn? Finn? Fann? — should find his way here with the remaining Fallen. If they don't get here by morning, though, you need to set off alone.”

“Alone?” echoed Conor, dismayed.

“Time is of the essence. The Greencloaks are not the only ones who seek Rumfuss.”

“But we don't know where to go,” protested Conor.

A gaping chasm of uncertainty opened in Rollan's stomach, and it only grew wider and blacker the more he considered. They had just barely survived an encounter with a few Conquerors. Tarik had been doing this a lot longer than either Rollan or Conor, and now he was flat on a table being fed gruel. The last time the boys had faced off against a Great Beast, they'd had the help of adults. Even if by some crazy stroke of luck they managed to meet back up with Finn, the other Greencloak didn't fight. Which meant that the plan on offer right now involved Rollan and Conor heading into the wilderness and then taking on Rumfuss on their own.

“I have a map,” Lady Evelyn said. When neither of them looked excited by this confession, she added, “Do you children know what a map is?”

Rollan and Conor exchanged another dismal look.

Lady Evelyn spread a map over Tarik's sleeping chest. She pointed to a town near the top. “This is Glengavin. The rumor says that Rumfuss is near here. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, that's far north, and up there they paint their faces blue and eat foreigners.”

That hadn't been what Rollan or Conor was thinking, but it sure was what they were thinking about *now*.

Lady Evelyn continued, “But the Lord of Glengavin is amicable toward the Greencloaks. He should provide a welcome, or at least no hindrance. The surroundings are quite wild and I doubt you'd be able to find it without this.”

“Where are we now?” Rollan asked.

Lady Evelyn traced a line southward. “Here.”

“Oh!” Conor said in a surprised, glad sort of yelp. “We're near Trunswick. It's on the way.”

“What's Trunswick?” Rollan asked. “And why does it make you say ‘oh!’ like an overexcited pigeon?”

“It’s where I used to be a servant,” Conor said. “And my family works the land near there.”

“You don’t have time for detours, Greencloak boy,” Lady Evelyn said. “Stick to the task.”

Conor’s face fell. “Right. Sure. Of course.”

Rollan couldn’t help it. He hated to see Conor looking so crestfallen. “Maybe we could still spend the night in Trunswick tomorrow. Not home, but close, right?”

Immediately Conor’s face brightened. “I’m sure they’d give us a warm welcome. And my mother —”

Lady Evelyn interrupted with a vague frown. “I feel as if I have heard a rumor about Trunswick.”

“Good or bad?” asked Rollan.

She tapped her remaining teeth with a stick. “Something about Greencloaks and the Devourer. Or maybe it was Trynsfield. Or Brunswick. Trunbridge? Was that the one we were talking about?”

Conor pointed to the map. “Trunswick. Right there.”

She said, “Lovely place, I’m sure.”



HAWKERS

THEY — FINN, MEILIN, AND ABEKE — WERE HIDING.

Along with Uraza, they were tucked between two boulders. As far as the eye could see, which wasn't very far in the darkness, there were man-sized, teeth-shaped stones pressed shoulder to shoulder. While Abeke marveled over the strangeness of the landscape and listened to the night, Meilin and Finn argued.

"Tonight is not a night to die," Finn whispered hoarsely.

Meilin's voice was cross. "I wasn't suggesting we die. I was suggesting we go back for the others."

"At this point, both of those things are the same," he muttered back.

"Shh," Abeke shushed them as quietly as she could. She jabbed a finger into the darkness.

Finn and Meilin turned to look where she pointed. Uraza was already looking, her ears swiveling to and fro. The black night kept most of its secrets, but Abeke could hear the wet squelch of a man's footprint on stone. One of the Conquerors. Close by.

Meilin opened her mouth. Abeke held her finger to her lips.

It had taken them hours to rid themselves of the group they'd first encountered in the forest. By then they had lost track of Conor, Rollan, and Tarik, and would have lost their way as well, if not for Finn's knowledge as a guide.

The sound of the man's footsteps came closer. Uraza stiffened. Abeke felt the vibration of an inaudible growl through the leopard's ribs pressed against her. Finn stretched out a hand: *Don't move.*

Holding their breath, they listened to the man climb over the boulders near them. All he had to do was clamber over two or three more, and he would discover them and alert his allies.

The Conqueror scraped over another boulder. His breath huffed out noisily as he landed at the base of it. Abeke suspected that he wasn't truly looking for them, or he would've minded how loud he was. But then again, maybe not. Abeke was always surprised by most people's ignorance of their own noisiness. It was one of the reasons why Finn's deliberate stealth impressed her.

Suddenly the Conqueror's breath was quite near. He was on the other side of the boulder Abeke knelt behind. If there had been any light at all, she probably would have been able to see his face through the gap between the rocks.

Every muscle in Uraza's body was knitted solid.

Abeke's heart pounded so loudly in her ears that she could barely hear anything else. She pressed her fingers into Uraza's fur. Slowly, her pulse calmed. Now she heard the sound of the man's palm as he felt his way along the stone.

He was so close.

Finn closed his eyes. Strangely enough, he looked quite serene. One of his arms hugged his chest so that his fingertips could touch his upper bicep. *Is that where his spirit animal is?* Abeke wondered.

Needle-fine claws scritch on stone as the Conqueror's spirit animal joined him. Abeke heard the click of hungry jaws. Somehow, a small, hungry spirit animal seemed more terrifying than a large one in this darkness. As if you maybe wouldn't notice it until it was right on you.

Then the Conqueror's voice sounded roughly. "Come on, Tan."

His footsteps receded as he headed away with whatever sort of animal Tan was. After a very, very long silence, Finn blew out a relieved sigh. Abeke released her handful of leopard fur. Uraza's tenseness oozed from her.

Meilin turned to Finn. "Do we have a regroup point? To reconnect with Tarik and the others?"

Abeke was unsurprised to hear her sounding efficient and strategic. That girl's heart was a battlefield.

"We did," Finn said. "A local Greencloak waypoint. But we've passed it, and we'd have to risk fighting back toward it. I think we should continue on to Trunswick. Even if the others aren't there, we can try to get a message to Greenhaven."

Abeke thought of the terrible fight in the woods and shuddered. She hoped the others were all right. "Message? How?"

"Gilded pigeons carry messages from many large towns in Eura," Finn answered. "Most Greencloaks know where to find someone who runs the birds."

I wonder if I could send a message to my family, Abeke thought.

Finn must have sensed her interest, because his expression softened and he added, “I will teach you how to send messages if it comes to that.”

Meilin eyed Abeke suspiciously, but said nothing.

What? What did I do? Oh, Abeke thought dismally. I wonder if she thinks I want to send messages to the enemy.

She wished there was a way that she could reassure the other girl, but there didn’t seem to be a way to without sounding even more suspicious. So she just said, “So we go now to Trunswick?”

“It’s still quite a ways from here,” Finn said. He pushed to his feet stiffly. “Let’s find a place to sleep. Somewhere a bit more comfortable.”

By *more comfortable*, Finn meant sleeping under rocks instead of on top of them. They spent a rather brittle night beneath a rock overhang on the edge of the boulder field. It wasn’t cozy, but at least it was dry and out of the wind. Abeke and Uraza curled up together like siblings and fell asleep.



In the morning light, their surroundings looked quite different. Coming from Nilo, Abeke had never seen anything like the landscape. Behind them was the expanse of strange, square boulders, and before them was a flat, purple-green field that went on and on. Finn looked somehow at home here: All his green-purple tattoos matched the colors of the grass, and his silver hair matched the clouds that pressed low.

“Those rocks are called the Giant’s Chessboard. And this is a moor,” he explained to them. “It looks quite innocent, but it can be treacherous. The ground is soft in places and will happily swallow a person. Or a panda.”

Meilin, stretching elegantly, said, “I’ll keep Jhi in passive form today.”

“Do you think it’s safe to let Uraza walk?” Abeke asked, resting her fingers on the leopard’s shoulder blades. “She prefers to run when she can.” *Like me.*

“I think so,” Finn said. “Cats are careful. But if we see anyone coming, it would probably be best to hide her.”

“I guess there is no mistaking her for an ordinary leopard,” Abeke said. Uraza preened at the admiration in Abeke’s voice.

“Not many ordinary leopards in Eura anyway,” Finn noted. “Much less extraordinary ones.”

They set off across the moor. The ground beneath them shifted from hard-packed rocks to watery silt without warning. If Abeke hadn’t been paying attention, she could’ve been in hidden water above her head before she had a chance to cry out.

In fact, only a few moments had passed before disaster struck. It wasn’t that Abeke heard something — it was that she suddenly didn’t hear something. A second later she realized that it was

Meilin's breathing. She didn't hear it anymore because Meilin wasn't *there* anymore.

Abeke spun this way and that, but there was only motionless moor ahead and behind her.

"Finn!" she cried.

Finn understood immediately. "Where?"

"I don't *know!*"

They both scanned the moor for any sign of the other girl, but even Uraza couldn't pinpoint where she had gone. Abeke was too aware that every second that passed was a second Meilin couldn't breathe.

"Uraza," Finn said urgently, "any ideas?"

Nothing.

Then Meilin's arm burst into sight. It looked as if it grew from the tufted grass. Her fingers felt for the foliage, seized it. There was no way she would be able to pull herself out, but she was going to try. Leaping forward, Finn gripped her forearm with one tattooed hand. He stretched out his other hand to Abeke.

"Don't let us both go in," he warned. Grabbing his hand, Abeke braced herself. Then she hauled, and Finn hauled, and the moor gave Meilin up like a newborn calf. She sprawled across the grass rather unbeautifully and spat out some muddy bits of water.

"Welcome back," Finn told Meilin, a little out of breath.

"I was doing fine," she retorted, spitting out another glob of dirty grass.

Finn's mouth made a crafty shape. He said, "Abeke and I will know better next time."

Abeke hid a smile.

Meilin was already retrieving the bag she'd dropped when she'd disappeared. She seemed completely unfazed by the experience. As she took down her damp hair and shook her head, she muttered, "It is going to take *forever* for my clothing to dry in this climate."

"I did say to be cautious," Finn said. "Let's use our heads."

The image of Meilin's hand extended from the hungry moor did keep Abeke careful for quite a bit of their journey that day. But then she began to notice how gifted Uraza was at finding dry spots to leap from. She also discovered that if she really focused on the leopard, she could sense them too. Soon the two of them were dancing across the moor.

Laughing, they outstripped the others. After a few minutes, however, Abeke and Uraza hesitated. Up ahead, Abeke got the *sense* of people. Then, a second later, she caught a glimpse of distant figures.

"Uraza!" she called. She held out her arm and the leopard vanished onto it without pause. The sting of it was more like a flush of heat now. It felt good. Powerful. Like Uraza was somehow becoming a part of her. She felt as if she could still feel the leopard beside her.

“What is it?” Meilin asked as she and Finn caught up.

Finn followed Abeke’s gaze to the approaching silhouettes. As they grew closer, Abeke could see that one of them carried a pike with a stubby red-and-white flag on it.

“I don’t like this,” he said. “I think they’re Hawkers.”

Meilin’s eyes narrowed. “What’s a Hawker?”

“They’re scoundrels who sell fake Nectar.” Finn’s voice had turned dark. “They also sell the pelts of spirit animals.”

“What?!” Abeke exclaimed. “Why?!”

Finn’s fingers rested lightly on his complex tattoos. “There is a dirty superstition that wearing the pelt of a spirit animal will give you their powers, even if you weren’t able to summon one yourself. You two *must* hide the fact that you have spirit animals or the Hawkers might be tempted to attack you.”

Meilin and Abeke wordlessly tugged their sleeves down.

As the figures approached, dragging a small cart behind them, Meilin dropped her gaze and slumped her shoulders. She was transformed immediately to a docile and shy farm girl. Abeke ducked her head hurriedly. She wasn’t sure she was as gifted an actress as Meilin, though.

“Hello, hello, hello!” said the first of the Hawkers. He had a very winning smile. It looked made out of rubber, like it could stretch and stretch and never break. If Finn hadn’t been uneasy before, Abeke probably would’ve trusted this newcomer.

“Fine morning to you,” said the woman beside him. She also appeared friendly, though she seemed to be made out of porridge instead of rubber. All soft dimples and warmth. “On a journey with your . . . daughters? Servants?”

Abeke and Meilin shot irritated glances at each other.

Finn replied in his quiet, unaffected way, “Foster daughters.”

“Oh and oh,” the man said. “I hear in your voice you’re from the North too.”

The Hawker said it aggressively — a taunt or a dare — but Finn did not waver. “That’s where we are headed. They will learn to sing for those with troubled bonds.”

“A noble calling,” the woman said.

“Noble,” agreed the rubbery man. “Troubled bonds and troubled bonds, eh? How old are you lot? Old enough! Do you have spirit animals, little daughters?”

Meilin actually managed a blush as she turned her face away, looking too bashful to even *think* of answering. Abeke kept her head ducked and hoped they’d think she was too shy as well. She was beginning to change her mind about trusting the smiling man.

“Do you know the legend of the black wildcat?” the rubbery man asked.

Finn's mouth thinned. Meilin shook her head imperceptibly. Abeke didn't move at all.

"Going to the North and don't know the legend of the black wildcat!" exclaimed the porridge woman. "For years, the North has had its stories of giant black cats wandering its moors. Wondrous things, these wildcats. Big as a horse. Fierce. Full of magic!"

Finn said, his voice flat, "There are no black wildcats in the North anymore."

"Oh, you and you!" said the rubbery man. "Have faith! There's a prophecy that says a boy will bond with the black wildcat and deliver the North from persecution and poverty! That will lead us all to a glorious, peaceful future!"

"Maybe one of you is the child of the prophecy!" the porridge woman exclaimed.

Abeke forgot to be bashful. She said, "I'm not a boy."

The rubbery man grinned and pointed at her. "Well spotted. But we can sell you a potion that will force the bond! We don't have to wait for the legend to come true — we can make it come true."

Finn said, "There's no such potion. And there is no black wildcat of the North. Not anymore."

"Oh, that is where you are wrong, funny little man!" said the porridge woman. She grandly let the door to their small cart fall open, revealing a rainbow of bottles, books, and colorful flotsam. A caged black animal peered out. When it saw Abeke's face, it mewled.

Meilin was unable to disguise her scorn. Her voice was anything but demure. "That's a house cat."

"It's a baby black wildcat," the rubbery man said.

"It's a full-grown house cat," Meilin insisted.

"It will get larger."

She scoffed, "I think it's plenty large enough for a house cat."

The cat stood on its back legs and pressed the small black pads of its feet against the cage bars. Abeke's heart and Uraza's tattoo stirred.

"Oh," Abeke said suddenly. "It's cruel to keep it locked up. You should set it free."

"And lose our livelihood?" the rubbery man said. "Indeed no."

Abeke burst out, "Can we buy it from you? Not to bond with, just to have. It really is only a cat."

Finn and Meilin stared at her. So did the rubbery man and the porridge woman.

"What will you buy it with?" the rubbery man asked.

Abeke had no money. They'd packed everything they needed, and anyway, back in Nilo, everything was bartered and traded for. There was no need for money.

Hesitantly, she said, "I will trade you for my bracelet. It's made of real elephant tail hair, all the way from Nilo, and it is good luck."

"Oh, Abeke," Meilin said with disgust. "It's a *cat*."

Finn said nothing, just crossed his arms.

Rubbery man and porridge woman consulted. Abeke knew it sounded crazy. She couldn't explain her affinity for the cat, but it felt a little like her bond with Uraza.

"All right and all right," agreed the rubbery man. "For the price of your good luck charm. That seems fair."

So Abeke handed over her bracelet, thinking, *I'm sorry, Soama, I hope you will understand!* The porridge woman unlocked the cage and gave the little black cat to Abeke.

As Abeke accepted it, the sleeves of her cloak slid to her elbows. For just a moment, her bare skin was exposed and her tattoo was revealed to the air. Hurriedly, Abeke shook her sleeve back down.

Maybe they didn't see it, she thought.

But she knew from the rubbery man's suddenly sharp expression that he had.

"So you *have* bonded," he said, grabbing her wrist. Every ounce of friendliness had drained from his voice.

Quick as anything, he had a knife in his hand. The knife was the opposite of his smile in every way. It was thin and unforgiving and as black as a lonely night.

And it was pointed right at Abeke.

"Produce your spirit animal," he ordered. "Or I will cut your throat."

Abeke *couldn't* give Uraza to these people, but she didn't know what else to do. Finn was motionless, his gaze fixed hypnotically on the knife. It was as if the true Finn had gone somewhere else and left just his body behind. Abeke didn't know what was wrong with him, but she knew she didn't have a chance without the help of Finn or Uraza.

Suddenly there was a blur of motion. The rubbery man released Abeke's wrist. He fell backward with a tremendous *whoof* as the air was knocked out of him.

Meilin stood over him, pointing his own knife at his throat. She was glorious and fierce, loose strands of her black hair snaking around her angry face. "It's insulting enough that you sold us a stray cat. But this is beyond insulting. Here is my bargain: Give this girl back her bracelet and *I* won't cut *your* throat."

The porridge woman started to move and Meilin threw up her other hand. With a flash of blue light, Jhi appeared. The rubbery man and the porridge woman stared, mouths agape. The little cat in Abeke's arms clung to her neck. It was a very clawsome hug.

"*Here* is a legend," Meilin snapped, gesturing to Jhi. The panda looked imaginary and grand in the gray-green surroundings. "The Four Fallen have returned! We will defeat the Conquerors and we will be the ones to usher in a peaceful world. I suggest you find something other than lies to sell."

There was absolute silence.

"Jhi," whispered the porridge woman.

Meilin gestured toward Abeke.

Abeke released Uraza in another flash of green light. The massive leopard *did* look legendary, her violet eyes ablaze.

“Uraza,” murmured the porridge woman. “Impossible.”

The rubbery man held out the bracelet. Finn took it from him without a word.

Meilin smiled sharply at the Hawkers. “Spread the word. The Great Beasts are back.”

Then she turned to Finn and Abeke. “What are we waiting for? We have work to do.”



CONOR REALLY WAS DOING HIS BEST TO BE A GOOD PARTNER with Briggan. Sometimes it was easy. He'd grown up with sheepdogs, and Briggan could be quite doglike. He liked for Conor to toss clumps of sod for him to fetch. He played gleeful tug-of-war with vines. He always let Conor lead, to show that he trusted him to be in charge.

But sometimes he was nothing like a dog, and Conor was never sure if this was because he was acting more like a wolf specifically or acting more like a Great Beast in general. For instance, the family sheepdogs had always been eager to curl up to sleep beside Conor. But Briggan, no matter how cold the night, slept at least a few feet from him. The sheepdogs had absolutely hated to be stared at, but if Conor caught Briggan's gaze, the wolf held it unblinkingly until Conor became uncomfortable.

And he really did howl at the moon.

Conor had spent so many nights being terrified of that sound. Wondering when the wolves would appear. Wondering if he'd be able to keep them from killing any sheep. Wondering if he'd be able to keep them from killing *him*.

If he was being honest, he tried so hard with Briggan to hide the fact that he was still a little afraid of him.

"Home sweet home, eh?" Rollan asked, shielding his eyes.

They had made it to Trunswick. Finally.

The others had never made it to the tower, so Rollan and Conor had started across the fields alone. They had walked and walked and walked, jumping at the slightest noise, fearing Conquerors, dangerous animals, or Conquerors with dangerous animals. They had stopped to snatch a few nervous

hours of sleep — long enough for Conor to have a fuzzy dream of both Rumfuss and a large, wild-looking hare sleeping in a patch of wisteria — and then walked some more.

Now the town rose up above them; the castle stood at the highest point of the hill. Blue-roofed houses made of sandy-colored stone crowded below it. Brilliant blue flags and banners flew from nearly every roof, as if the town were waving a frantic greeting to the boys. Conor knew that all the standards would feature Briggan, Eura's patron beast. He felt a warm flood of relief: It had been such a nerve-racking journey without either of the older Greencloaks. But now here was familiar old Trunswick. Everything would be all right, surely.

"So this is Trunswick," Rollan observed. "Where you have fond memories of being sold into servitude by your father?"

Conor's cheeks heated. "I wasn't sold."

"Loaned, then," Rollan corrected warmly. "Oh, don't look so beaten up over it. My father rudely up and *died* on me, so I reckon he's the worse parent. Oh, hey. You did say 'a warm welcome,' right?" He pointed toward the town. "Did you mean warm like 'burning'?"

A plume of smoke rose from the opposite side of the town. Vaguely uneasy, Conor said, "Sometimes the farmers burn their fields to kill the thistles and heather. Come on, we'll go in a side way."

A sandy-colored wall that matched the sandy-colored houses surrounded Trunswick. There were several unguarded gates. The main gate was always crowded, so Conor led them toward the nearly hidden one nearest to the castle. He paused, tipping his head back.

Two blue flags flew over the gate, just like before. But unlike before, Briggan's silhouette was missing. In its place was the outline of a bulky black cat. The change was so absolutely unexpected and so *wrong* that Conor couldn't immediately process the truth of it.

Slowly, he asked Rollan, "Am I awake?"

"Is this a trick question?"

Conor had grown up under the image of a gray wolf on a blue field. Briggan's iconic image had flown over every state event. Every family had a wolf figure on their mantel or a howling wolf carved into the wood above the doorway. Briggan *was* Eura.

But now there was a blue flag with a wildcat flying over the gate.

It seemed like it should be a dream. Or a hallucination.

Rollan had noticed Conor's goggling at the flag, so Conor stammered, "That's supposed to be Briggan."

"What? The cat? Looks a little like Uraza."

This cat was far more muscled than Abeke's leopard, but Conor saw the resemblance. If he hadn't known any better, he would've thought it was supposed to be the silly wildcat from the children's stories he'd grown up with. Hadn't every child in Eura heard about the hero who would rise up with a black cat? It had been an inspiring sort of myth.

But Trunswick didn't need a myth. They had Briggan. He was back. He was real.

Before Conor had time to wonder about this out loud, a huge mastiff burst from the other side of the entrance. It bayed, jowls slobbery. The noise rumbled in their feet. Its threatening bark called out a second dog. Conor knew these were no ordinary hounds. The Trunswicks' mastiffs were infamous for their fight-to-the-death training. It wasn't their bite that was deadly, although it was formidable. It was their *hold*. The mastiffs were trained to find a grip on their victims' throats and not let go until a Trunswick guard gave the order.

"Brace yourself," Conor warned.

"I don't get along with dogs," Rollan muttered, reaching toward the dagger he wore by his side. Briggan's ears pinned and his tail dropped.

But the mastiffs merely circled and pushed them forward. This wasn't an attack. It was an escort.

"Spirit animals?" Conor asked Rollan.

"Slobber animals," Rollan replied, holding his hands out of the way of their drooling mouths.

"What's going on? Is this slimy greeting usual?"

Before Conor could reply, a guard shouted at them from his post at the gate. "Hey, you!" The mastiffs herded the two boys closer. A few feet away, Conor saw that the guard wore a blue Trunswick surcoat over his chain mail. But, as on the flag, the wolf insignia had been replaced with a black wildcat. Behind him, another three mastiffs emerged. The guard tugged Conor's cloak, rubbing mud off between his thumb and forefinger and revealing the color beneath. "Greencloaks!" The contempt in his voice when he said the word was as shocking as anything else that had happened.

"You can come quietly to the prison, or you can make this difficult."

Of all the ways Conor had imagined this day would go, this had not been one of them.

Rollan said, "Keep your shirt on, old man. We haven't done anything wrong."

Stunned, Conor stammered, "Please. I'm not a stranger. I used to be Devin Trunswick's servant. I — I lived here."

How foolish he felt. Just a bumbling shepherd facing these castle guards, unable to explain himself.

"Quietly," the guard repeated. A few people had gathered behind him, anticipating drama. "Or difficult?" As he moved toward them, Briggan let loose a rippling snarl.

“No, Briggan,” Conor said. There were five of the dogs and only one Briggan. Although Briggan was superior in most ways to each dog, if one of the mastiffs got him by the throat, he’d be powerless against the other four. “We’re not here to fight.”

He felt Rollan’s attention on him, waiting for him to somehow sort this out; this was his hometown after all. But this was no Trunswick Conor knew. Not with that strange animal on the blue flag. Not with this guard, this strangely bloodthirsty crowd, these mastiffs.

A familiar voice rang out. “What’s the commotion?”

Inside the gate, people and animals parted for the newcomer. An animal led the way: a large black cat, waist-tall. Its eyes were golden and its pelt was silky, inky black with even blacker spots that showed in the sun.

A black panther.

As it stalked dangerously down the cobblestones, a boy stepped out behind it.

Devin Trunswick.

His posture was even haughtier than before. His clothing was impeccable. Everything about him shouted that he was a lord’s son. Conor felt so foolish for thinking anything might have changed between them because of Briggan.

How ridiculous, Conor thought. I’m still a shepherd’s son and he’s still a noble. We won’t ever be equal.

Devin’s eyes found Conor’s and held them. He seemed to be thinking the same thing.

Devin held out his arm. Without a second’s pause, the panther vanished. A tattoo appeared on Devin’s arm.

Conor inhaled audibly.

Impossible. It was absolutely impossible. Conor had been at the Nectar Ceremony where Devin had failed to call up a spirit animal. He had been standing right beside him. Close enough to see the disappointment painted on his mouth.

His mother hadn’t mentioned this in her letter. Conor’s pulse fluttered.

Where is my mother?

“Devin!” he called, trying to cover his surprise. “It’s me, Conor.”

Devin said, “I know.” Then he called to the guards, cool and imperious, “What are you waiting for? *Seize them!*”

Rollan grabbed Conor’s elbow. Together they jumped away. One of the guards snatched at Conor, but he rolled out of the way. Briggan snapped at the mastiffs. They were stronger, but slower. And there was absolutely no reason to engage them: they had no purpose here in Trunswick. Conor knew

these streets. If he could get to the smaller alleys, he might be able to lead Rollan and Briggan out of danger.

He ran down an alley. Beside him, Briggan jumped on top of crates, his powerful hind legs sending them crashing behind him. Essix coursed overhead, her shadow shrinking and growing as she ducked beneath clotheslines and over jutting roofs.

A girl shouted out a window, “*Run, Greencloaks!*”

Conor barely had time to look up before the girl’s mother dragged her inside and clapped the window closed. The mother’s expression was frightened.

Farther ahead, more windows opened. A boy and a girl waved at Conor, and then, just after Conor and Rollan had passed, they tipped buckets of scalding-hot water into the alleyway. The pursuing guards yelled in pain. Steam curled up the walls. The children were helping Conor and Rollan escape.

Conor had no breath to thank them, but he waved and hoped they understood.

“I’ll remember that!” one of the guards shouted at the windows, his hand clapped over his scalded face. Conor and Rollan left them behind, not slowing. Conor knew that there was a hidden weakness in the wall nearby. If they could just make it there, they could leave Trunswick behind and escape across the moors.

But as Conor darted down a side street, a huge lizard — as long as Briggan — suddenly loomed from the darkness. Its face and clawed feet were black, but the rest of its bumpy hide was a checkerboard of orange and black. Everything about it looked poisonous. It hissed like something out of a nightmare. Conor scabbled in the other direction. Behind him he heard snarls and cries. He couldn’t see Briggan or Rollan. It felt like there were walls and people everywhere — an older girl with a flat frog in her hands, another girl with the giant lizard, and Devin with his leering smile.

As he spun, Conor was brought up short by a fourth person: a tall, dark-skinned boy and his spirit animal, a long-legged chestnut bird with a big, stork-like head. The bird was tall enough to look right into his eyes. Possibly it was adrenaline, but the hair on Conor’s arms felt charged, like when lightning had struck very close.

“I’d suggest giving in,” the boy said. “My hammerkop here has a very short temper.”

“Also,” added the girl holding the flat frog, “because we have your spirit animal.”

The mastiffs had pinned Briggan to the ground. Conor’s heart sank when he saw that one of them had bracketed its jaws loosely around Briggan’s windpipe. The wolf’s eyes flashed, full of rebellion, but he had no choice but to submit.

“Also also,” Devin said, “we have this one. His cloak seems slightly less green than yours.”

He pointed to Rollan, who squirmed and thrashed in a guard's hands. Behind them, a tall, handsome man in a richly embroidered cloak watched the proceedings with an approving smile.

"Two little piggies," the man said. "And one not-so-big, not-so-bad wolf."

Rollan sneered and spat at him.

The man seemed unconcerned. If anything, Rollan's rage pleased him. "You had your chance to choose sides, Rollan. We both see you chose poorly."

This man knew Rollan? Conor tried to place him. Was he from the castle? A guard?

No.

His mind returned to the mountains of Amaya, where Barlow, their ally, their *friend*, had been slain — stabbed through the back while saving Abeke's life.

This was Zerif.

A Conqueror.

We've delivered ourselves to the enemy, Conor thought, cursing himself. *All because I wanted to come back here. Why? This isn't home. This place has always been a trap. All because I wanted to return to a place where I'd always been trapped. Now I'm trapped all over again.*

He couldn't explain to Rollan how sorry he was.

The crowd parted for the earl himself. He looked exactly like his son Devin, only he had a pointy, neatly trimmed beard. He surveyed them coldly. "Put them both in the Howling House. We'll decide what to do with them later." To Conor and Rollan he said, "Place your spirit animals in passive form now."

"Yeah," Devin agreed. "It'd be too bad if we had to hurt a Great Beast." His nasty smile indicated he didn't think it would be too bad at all.

"Wait," Rollan snapped. "What are we being imprisoned for?"

"We've done nothing," Conor said. He unsuccessfully searched the earl's face for any trace of compassion. "And you know I'm not a stranger to Trunswick."

The earl barely glanced at them. It was obvious he didn't find Rollan or Conor worthy enough to get the full attention he'd give a *proper* enemy. He said, "The cloak you wear here condemns you, boy. Trunswick has had enough of the Greencloaks' iron rule. We're weary of all their talk of Erdas's destiny." He lifted a lazy hand toward a blue flag bearing the wildcat. "Erdas, indeed. All this talk of our destiny. Trunswick will make its own destiny."

Conor protested, "My lord, we only came to —"

The earl held up his hand as if he were calming a dog. "Please be quiet. I will no longer tolerate hearing the voices of the likes of you."

The likes of you.

His voice oozed dismissal.

It was like a slap. Conor had not been hit, but he felt the same urge to sink to his knees. The same rush of blood to his cheeks. The same thud of his heart in his rib cage.

Devin was trying very hard to hide a smile. Zerif nodded approvingly. As if he was so pleased the earl had finally stopped letting those Greencloaks push him around.

The earl turned to the guard beside him. “If the boy won’t put his animal into passive form, have the dogs kill it and burn the body with the rest.”

Rollan’s eyes widened, his cool facade dropping.

Conor wordlessly stretched his hand toward where Briggan was pinned to the ground. The wolf immediately vanished from beneath the mastiffs and appeared on Conor’s arm. Rollan, however, had no such success. With a scowl, he called to Essix. But the falcon flew high overhead in ever wider circles. Every so often the bird looked down so that it was clear she was listening, just not obeying.

Devin and the girl with the frog snickered. Zerif yawned. It was a glorious yawn, his hand elegantly covering his mouth and his laugh at once. Behind them, Conor could see Devin’s little brother, Dawson, averting his eyes. He’d always been the best one in the family. It was hard to imagine him taking any joy in this horrible scene, but he was too young to help now.

“The boy’s bond is weak,” the earl said. “So the bird’s no threat anyway. Just leave it and lock the others up.”

“Welcome home, shepherd,” Devin sneered.

THE HOWLING HOUSE

IT DIDN'T TAKE ESSIX LONG TO FIND MEILIN, ABEKE, AND FINN. They were just climbing a grassy bank that afforded a view of Trunswick when Finn spotted the falcon circling. He waved one arm, and then two. Abeke and Meilin joined in. Essix wheeled toward them.

“It’s Essix. Does that mean something’s happened to Rollan?” Meilin asked. The thought annoyed her. If someone was going to hurt that boy, she wanted it to be *her*.

“Essix doesn’t seem alarmed enough for him to be dead,” Finn said. Abeke winced, but Meilin appreciated that Finn didn’t try to sugarcoat the possibilities for them. Lives were at stake. It would do them all well to remember that.

Finn shielded his eyes to better see the falcon. “But she seems agitated. It’s hard to say if Rollan sent her to us or if she’s come on her own accord. Do you see a message tied to her leg?”

“Nothing,” Meilin verified.

“Are they in Trunswick?” Finn called up to Essix. The bird shrieked back, three times.

Meilin said, “I think that means yes.”

Finn asked the falcon, “Should we meet up with them right now?”

Essix cried out once. It was an angry, ferocious bark of a sound. Quite clearly: no.

“Imprisoned, I would guess,” Finn said. “Or working secretly to get information. Either way, we’ll have to be cautious.”

Meilin considered. She touched the tattoo where Jhi waited in passive form. It wasn’t nearly as effective as the meditation sessions, but the gesture reminded her of that clarity of thought. She asked, “Should we circle the town to see if we can learn any more?”

Finn nodded. “Probably a wise idea. I shouldn’t really go marching into town without some strategy anyway. The Earl of Trunswick and I had a disagreement not too long ago.”

“What sort of disagreement?” Meilin demanded.

Finn narrowed his eyes in the direction of the castle. “He tried to kill me.”

That seemed like a valid reason to avoid going into town.

“In any case, it would be advantageous to have a plan,” he added.

Abeke made a little pained noise. At first Meilin thought it was because of worry, but then she saw no — it was because the Hawkers’ ridiculous black cat thought Essix was going to eat her. The cat had affixed its claws rather securely into Abeke’s hair. It looked as if the animal was actually growing directly from the other girl’s head.

“You could let that cat down,” Meilin said scathingly. “You wanted to free her, and now she’s free.”

Abeke tried to remove the cat from her head. Reams of her own hair stretched from her scalp to the cat.

“She’s scared,” insisted Abeke, still tugging. The cat let out a rattling wail that oscillated in time with the tugs. “She won’t slow us down.”

Meilin narrowed her eyes, but it was hard to argue. Abeke had been seeming a little more feline lately, more like Uraza. Maybe this was part of it. “Good. Keep it that way. The others need us, whether or not they’re in immediate trouble. The sooner we find out more and meet back up with them, the sooner we can get to Rumfuss. Now, let’s get out of here, unless you *want* the Conquerors to catch us.”

Before Meilin could stop herself, the insinuation slipped out — the prospect that Abeke might not mind the Conquerors finding them at all, since she might still be working for them. Finn leveled a very heavy look at her. Tarik or Olvan would have probably scolded her for talking to Abeke like that, but she thought they also would have understood why deep down, Meilin still didn’t trust Abeke. And it was hard to be very kind to someone she didn’t trust, now more than ever.

But Finn simply turned away and, under his breath, said something only Meilin could hear. “Trust must be practiced.”

Meilin wanted to roll her eyes and ignore him, but his words — and his quiet disapproval — rankled her. Somewhere along the way, she had started wanting to impress him. This annoyed her for reasons she couldn’t quite find words for. Why should she care for the respect of a man who wouldn’t even lift a sword to save himself at that forest battle?

But he had led them across the Giant’s Chessboard and the moor, and had pulled her from the waste. And without his advice in the Moon Tower, she would have never learned about Jhi’s

problem-solving abilities.

What is a warrior's heart? she wondered. *Does it always carry a sword?*

Grudgingly, she said out loud, "Abeke, I'm sorry if . . . my words seemed harsh. I didn't mean them that way."

Abeke's eyebrows shot up. She appeared so surprised by this miserly kindness. Was it possible Meilin had been a little too uncaring the past several days? Just because she sometimes doubted Abeke's loyalties didn't mean she had to be so cruel about it.

Finn looked over his shoulder.

He didn't say anything. Not a word. But he nodded, and Meilin's heart felt lighter.

They climbed over the bank, down toward Trunswick, keeping enough distance to avoid attracting any unwanted attention. Meilin searched the town's appearance for any clues as to what kind of place this could be and what their friends could be up to inside it. The town's structure was straightforward: castle crowning the hill, buildings huddled around it. It stank of beeswax smoke, coal, and the peculiar scent of horse hooves, so Meilin could tell already that it had more than its fair share of blacksmiths. The blue flags that flew from nearly every roof flapped listlessly, made of heavy wool rather than the silk and linen flags that Meilin had grown up under. The entire town seemed crude and disheveled in comparison to Zhong's elegant cities, and Meilin felt a pang in her heart.

She pushed it down.

No time for weakness or second-guessing her decision to stay now.

"Ah, Trunswick," said Finn. His voice had gone a little flat. It was a bit like his face had gone when the Hawker had brandished the knife.

"What is that over there?" Meilin asked. Over a nearby knot of trees, a patch of sky was dark with smoke.

Lifting her chin, Abeke sniffed the air. "I think it's a bonfire. It's not just wood they are burning, anyway. Do you smell it?"

Abeke was right. There was something a little off about the odor of the fire. Something a little unpleasant that made her feel anxious.

Zhong, burning . . . She pushed the thought away as her eyes stung.

Finn interrupted her thoughts by saying, "It doesn't feel like a good sign."

"Finn . . . I think Essix is trying to tell us something," Abeke said. She pointed in the other direction, toward Trunswick. Or rather, since she was holding the cat with both hands, she pointed with the cat to where Essix circled over a large building partway up the hill. "Do you think the others are in that building?"

“It would be bad luck if they were,” Finn said. “That’s the Howling House. It’s where they keep people and animals who bonded without Nectar, and developed the bonding sickness. Well, one sort of bonding sickness — it’s for those who went mad. It’s part hospital and part prison.”

Meilin’s mind turned over his words: *those who went mad*. She had heard of the bonding sickness, of course. Everyone learned about the dangers of bonding without the Nectar. In the days before Nectar, some bonds went well, and other bonds didn’t. Human and animal were tied to each other, and yet couldn’t connect. Sleepless nights piled one upon the other. Some were able to work through it on their own, or learned to live with the difficult bond. But others, as Finn noted, went mad.

This was why even the most remote village in Zhong had a designated authority to notify the Greencloaks when a child came of age. It was hard to imagine anyone bonding without Nectar these days — harder still to imagine enough difficult bonds to warrant an entire prison.

Meilin asked, “You think they’re being kept prisoner there?”

“It is the only place that would hold them and their spirit animals, yes. Everything inside that building is reinforced to prevent spirit animals from escaping.”

Meilin said, “How do you know so much about that place?”

Finn didn’t answer. He’d gone all quiet and faraway again. Suddenly she remembered what he had said in the Moon Tower. He had bonded to Donn without the Nectar. What had he called his bond?

Difficult.

Difficult enough to be locked up in the Earl of Trunswick’s house for insane humans and animals?

Difficult enough that the Earl of Trunswick might have tried to kill him?

“So now what?” Abeke demanded.

All three of them looked toward the sun in the sky.

Finn said, “We wait.”

He held out his arm, and Essix coasted smoothly down to land heavily on it. Abeke settled to the ground, opened her bag, and pulled out some jerky to munch on. They all seemed content to wait.

Waiting was Meilin’s least favorite thing.



Trunswick was a silent place after dark. When night fell, Abeke, Meilin, and Finn crept closer to town. Unlike the cities of Zhong, which were lit and beautiful even at night, Trunswick was nearly as black as the moor. Only a few lanterns illuminated the main street up to the castle. There were no candles in any of the windows. No voices rose from the bars and no stragglers moved through the streets. Even Trunswick’s famous and industrious blacksmiths completely disappeared as night fell, leaving behind only a few glowing embers in their forges. Guards stood in vigilant silence at each of the gates.

Finn whispered, “There’s something very wrong with this town.”

Meilin, Finn, and Abeke crouched around the back of the wall. There were no gates here; no one to see them. But that meant there were no easy entrances either. In a low voice, Abeke asked Uraza, “Can you find us a weakness in the wall?”

The leopard galloped away, low and silky. She returned a few minutes later to lead them to a bricked-up gate. Some of the barrier had crumbled, leaving an opening just large enough for a person to crawl through.

Meilin kept Jhi in passive form. The gap was *not* large enough for a giant panda.

On the inside of the wall, the soundless nature of the town was even more pronounced. Meilin was very aware of their footfalls on the uneven cobblestones as Finn led the way up the narrow roads toward the Howling House. Uraza trailed behind, ears swiveling as she listened for threats. Overhead, Essix’s dark form flitted from roof to roof, confirming they were headed in the right direction.

At the Howling House, torches blazed, their fiery reflections thrashing in the puddles of last night’s rain. Out front, guards moved restlessly. At least three large mastiffs lay just inside the door. It was a hive of activity in comparison to the quiet town.

“This seems impossible!” Meilin whispered to Finn.

“Patience,” he whispered back.

Meilin wasn’t very fond of patience.

Abeke whispered to Uraza, and the two of them danced quietly through the shadows, finding an invisible path around the side of the fortified barn. The leopard led them to a hiding space in a blacksmith’s shop directly across the narrow road from the Howling House. It was full of the things one would expect to find in a smith’s shop — anvil, furnace, wrought iron firedogs for holding wood — but was also cluttered with cabinetry and farming equipment.

In the smith’s, Abeke crouched behind a half-built cabinet. Finn took a place behind a large harrow. Meilin hid beside the still-warm forge. The blacksmith was on the higher side of the road, and from their hiding places they had a clear view into one of the only rooms with a normal-sized window. Inside, there were five people eating a not insubstantial meal. One very handsome, oily man and four kids.

The last time Meilin had seen the man with his tidy beard and expensive clothing, he had been stabbing one of her allies in the back during the battle for the last talisman. Just the sight of him placing a spoon in his mouth was enough to close off her throat for a moment. She barely checked her first impulse, which was to leap across the road and engage him in combat on the spot.

“Zerif,” Meilin and Abeke snarled at the same time. Their voices were equally harsh, which surprised Meilin. She still didn’t trust Abeke, but her rage at Zerif sounded genuine. Uraza’s tail thrashed at the abrasive tone.

Finn said, “I’ll stand watch here. You two go listen.”

Abeke handed Finn the cat and Meilin shook her head with annoyance.

“What are you planning to do with that thing anyway?” she demanded. “Throw it at Rumfuss?”

But Abeke merely smiled, cool and catlike, before following Meilin to the window. The voices inside were mumbled, but audible.

“Don’t be foolish,” Zerif was saying in between bites of dinner. Meilin was disgusted to watch him eat — not because he wasn’t careful, but because of the opposite. For some reason the care he took to place each bite in his mouth and then wipe his lips infuriated her. *How dare he eat like there is nothing wrong in the world. How dare he wipe his beard clean as if it matters if he is handsome!*

“No one will care about the Great Beasts when we’re done,” he continued. “Did you see any of the townsfolk caring a whit for Briggan today? They only had eyes for Elda.”

Devin preened as he admired his wildcat tattoo. “She is everything the people want.”

“That’s what I am telling you children,” Zerif said. The older blond girl with the flat frog looked rather annoyed at the word *children*. “For decades, the Greencloaks lured in most people with their talk of Erdas’s Great Beasts. By making every village everywhere reliant on the Greencloaks and the Nectar, they denied the power every country already has. Briggan serves no one but Briggan! But you, Devin. You serve Eura with their black wildcat. And you, Tahlia, serve your people with Tiddalik, Stetriol’s beloved water-holding frog. Ana, with Amaya’s glorious and fearful gila monster, Ix. And of course Karmo with Impundulu, Nilo’s lightning bird. How long have your people been waiting for these legends to release them from hardship? Now they don’t have to wait for the future. *We make the future.*”

Devin nodded enthusiastically as Meilin silently fumed.

“How long do we have to deal with people like *them*, then?” demanded Karmo, jerking his chin toward the interior of the barn. He was a handsome, dark-skinned boy already as tall as Zerif. “As long as we battle the Greencloaks, we are distracted from our true purpose of aiding our people.”

People like them. Meilin was sure he must mean Rollan, Conor, and Tarik.

“Once we get the talismans, they will be powerless to stand against us,” Zerif said. He was briefly distracted by his reflection in the spoon. He admired it.

Tahlia looked vexed. “Just how can you be so certain? There are four other *children* with Great Beasts out there, looking for the *exact* same thing as us.”

“Two,” corrected Devin with a smirk. “These two we already have aren’t getting out any time soon. My father built the Howling House to be the best.”

Abeke and Meilin shot each other a look. Two? Who was missing?

“And I chose all of *you* to be the best,” Zerif said. “The four returned Great Beasts were summoned at random to rather unworthy human partners, as I think you saw earlier today. Each of you, on the other hand, was handpicked to be a hero. Excellent breeding —” He smiled at Devin.

“Exceptional intelligence —” He pointed his spoon at Tahlia. “Exceeding connections —” This was directed to the girl with the lizard. “And exacerbating strength,” he said to Karmo.

The table was quiet, probably because none of them knew what *exacerbating* meant, including Zerif.

“With the Bile,” Zerif continued, “we can create even more worthy heroes. It creates bonds even when the Nectar fails. And the bonds are superior. The human has complete control! We choose the animal! No follower of the Reptile King needs to worry about bonding with a field mouse. Long live the Reptile King!”

The table was quiet again, and the faces of the children indicated that they had heard Zerif give this speech before.

Finally, he cleared his throat, moved his plate, and produced a piece of parchment. “Here’s the map we got from the two urchins. Devin, you and Karmo will use this to follow them to their destination. Get the talisman. I will come find you.”

Karmo said dubiously, “You are not joining us?”

“Karmo,” Zerif said. He stood and draped an arm across the tall boy’s shoulders. “Karmo, Karmo, Karmo. Now that the first stage of your training is done, it’s time for me to return Tahlia to Stetriol and Ana to Amaya, where they can begin to inspire their people. Devin remains here in Eura where he is most influential. And you, as we’ve discussed, have more work that you can do on Nilo’s behalf before you go home as a hero. There are two of you. Two of them. I think we can all agree that Elda and Impundulu are more than a match for that panda, even with Uraza helping her.”

Meilin gritted her teeth. There was no point in staying any longer. Punching Abeke’s arm lightly, she indicated for the other girl to follow.

When they returned to Finn, Meilin said grimly, “They’re definitely Conquerors, handpicked by Zerif. He says they have some sort of version of Nectar that can *force* a bond. And they have Rollan and Conor there in the Howling House.”

Finn’s expression went very dark. He said, “At Greenhaven, we had heard rumors. . . . There’s no time to spare. We have to get the others out. What we need is a diversion. Havoc. So they don’t have time to attack us.”

Meilin felt an idea prickle. She whispered, “Keep a lookout. I need to have a moment of silence.”

She released Jhi from her dormant state. The panda was dreadfully conspicuous in the dark. Not the black bits, of course. But everything white. And the blacksmith shop was not designed to fit a panda. Jhi shifted her weight so that the anvil would stop poking her in the flank.

Meilin asked, “Jhi, will you help me? I think I have an idea, but I need to focus.”

The panda actually looked happy to be asked — ears pricked forward, eyes brighter, mouth less tense. Meilin hadn’t realized before that Jhi’s face was capable of holding such expression.

The moment Meilin closed her eyes, the panda’s calming influence washed over her.

It would be easy to fall asleep, she thought. She could curl up in the panda’s soft fur right here. Suddenly she missed Zhong so badly that she could cry.

This was all part of the panda’s power, she knew. Pushing down all her logical barriers. She didn’t have time for it. Focusing, she shoved away the emotion.

Choices swirled into view. This time they were more like stars than planets: bright and hard to look at directly. When Meilin considered some of them — causing a commotion with the mastiffs, sneaking in another window, attacking the guards directly — they fizzled and died out.

But one choice stayed bright. Meilin let it circle her as she studied it from all sides, looking for dull areas or weakness.

This idea isn’t an easy one, she thought.

Jhi’s encouragement washed over her. Of course she was right. Meilin had never needed the easy way.

She opened her eyes.

“Well?” Abeke asked.

Meilin said, “I’m going to need you to cover for me. This idea is going to take a bit of time.”



ESCAPE

“WELL, THIS IS BRILLIANT,” ROLLAN SAID. “EVERYTHING I imagined our second mission would be.”

Their captors had taken all their things and thrown them in a stall in the Howling House, fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet long, with bars and fine wire over a single, tiny window high up on the wall. The stone floor was covered with claw marks. Deep ones. Some of them were at the edges, like an animal had tried to dig itself out. But some of them were randomly gouged into the middle of the wall. Like the animal was just angry. Or crazy.

Conor was halfway to crazy himself after being in the stall for only an hour. He didn't do well being contained. All he could think about was how wrong Trunswick seemed, and how he didn't know if his mother was trapped here — or even if she was still alive. He couldn't be sure of anything in a world where he was thrown into prison on sight.

Rollan lolled on the opposite wall, scruffy and indolent, picking his teeth with a piece of straw. He looked rather at home here in prison. But Conor was beginning to realize that Rollan worked very hard on looking at home anywhere.

“I just don't understand how Devin has a spirit animal,” Conor said. “I was there, Rollan. I saw him at the Nectar Ceremony. There was no trick.”

Rollan mused, “Did you see how tight he and the spirit animal were? They were the best of friends. It did just what he asked. I mean, why would it do that? Clearly it's not because of Devin's dazzling personality.”

In between this line of thinking and remembering the encounter with the Trunswicks earlier, Conor suddenly felt awfully tired . . . and an awful lot like a shepherd's son. “Look, Rollan. I'm sorry. We

wouldn't be here if it weren't for me."

The other boy wordlessly lifted an eyebrow.

"It wasn't that it was ever home," Conor confessed. "Home was the fields. But . . . it was different, at least, before. My mother sent me a letter and said she was working here now that I was gone, and that things weren't going so well. I just wanted to see her, see how bad things were. And I thought it would make her proud to see . . ."

He trailed off. He didn't want to think about where his mother might be. His heart felt as low as it could go.

"We all make mistakes," Rollan said. "For instance, that laundry I ate last night. That was a mistake. I can still taste it."

Conor sighed. At least he had apologized. It didn't make him feel much better, though. He knew only weakness had brought him here. Why in the world would someone like him have summoned Briggan? What a waste.

"You're driving me crazy with the pacing," Rollan said. He frowned. "Did you just hear something?"

Conor listened. He heard the sounds of animals moving in the stall next door, and night birds cooing outside, and the sound of his own breathing. "What sort of something?"

Rollan cocked his head. "A screaming sort of something?"

They both listened.

Outside, a thin shout pierced the quiet. Then another. Then a higher scream, far away.

"Yep," said Rollan. "See, screaming. I'd recognize that sound anywhere. I'm a bit of a connoisseur of it. That, to me, sounds like high-quality surprise right there."

They both jumped as something struck the fine wire of the window. It was Essix, perched precariously on the ledge. She dragged her talons across the wire.

"She's trying to get in!" Conor exclaimed.

"Sadly, that's not going to happen, my friend," Rollan told Essix, who cried thinly.

Outside, the shouts grew more numerous. They were followed by a peculiar crashing noise that Conor couldn't quite place.

Suddenly Finn was at the door, a small square of his face visible through the wire-covered view hole by the latch. He worked busily at the lock.

"Finn!" Conor said happily.

"Get ready," Finn warned. His fingers trembled as he worked at the lock, but his voice was steady. "You might have to fight your way out."

Rollan yipped in surprise. Water pooled around his feet.

Alarmed, Conor lifted a damp boot from the ground. “Where’s that water coming from?”

“The water tower,” Finn said. He kept digging at the lock. His hands kept trembling, but the rest of him stayed steady. Voices rose outside.

“What’s that sound?” Conor asked.

“Greencloaks, and their supporters,” Finn replied. He kicked the lock angrily. “The earl’s locked up dozens of people who spoke out for the Greencloaks.”

Rollan joined Conor at the door. “What’s wrong with your hands?”

Finn’s eyes cut up to Rollan. “Nothing.”

Rollan’s eyes narrowed as if he knew there was more to the story, but he just asked, “What’s wrong with the lock?”

“It’s jammed somehow,” Finn said. He pulled on the door, hard. It jumped on its hinges but didn’t give way. “I need more force. Can you push from the inside?”

Conor and Rollan threw their shoulders against the wood. The door jumped unsuccessfully. They couldn’t push hard enough. There was shouting from not very far away.

“Are the other locks like this?” Conor asked.

“No. It’s only this one that seems jammed! I’ve unlocked it, but the bolt won’t give.”

“Then free the others,” Conor said. “Maybe they can help hold off the guards. We’ll keep pushing. Go!”

Finn hesitated. “I’ll come back when I’m done if you haven’t escaped yet.”

As he hurried away, Conor and Rollan tried the door again. Water wicked up their legs. Straw floated on the water seeping through the walls and under the door.

“How much water can there be in that tower?” growled Rollan through gritted teeth.

“How *stuck* can this door be?” Conor said. “They just put us in here! If we just had a bit more weight —”

A voice came through the door. “You *do*. Release Briggan!”

“Meilin!” both boys said at once.

Her angular eye appeared in the opening. What was visible of her hair was soaking wet. She said, “Trust you two to need to get rescued! Conor, why are you just standing there? I said, release Briggan! Hurry up. Where’s Tarik?”

“It’s a long story. He’s safe, but not here. Meilin, the guards —” Conor started.

“They’re busy for the moment. I’ve knocked over the water tower.”

“Knocked it over!” Rollan said, shocked. “It’s not a *goblet*. You can’t just *knock it over*.”

“Well, I did. Conor!”

With a flash, Conor released Briggan. The wolf instantly appeared beside him. He lifted his damp paws with distaste.

“Can you help, Briggan?” Conor asked. “You’re heavy!”

Without hesitation, the wolf jumped up onto the door. His weight hit it just as Meilin pulled on her side. Conor and Rollan hurled themselves against it as well. Meilin groaned. Briggan groaned. The boys groaned. The door groaned too. And then it fell open.

“That’s it!” Conor clapped his hands on either side of the wolf’s muzzle. The wolf let out a thrilled, resonant cry.

“All right, all right,” Rollan said. “Enough of the happy reunion.”

They splashed down the dim corridor after Meilin. Half of the torches had been extinguished in the commotion.

Rollan’s voice was tinged with awe as he asked, “How did you knock over the water tower?”

Meilin glanced over her shoulder. Without a hint of a smile, she replied, “I had tutors for it, back in Zhong.”

The three of them suddenly grinned at each other, relieved that they were back together again, even if they weren’t out of trouble.

“Prepare yourselves,” Meilin added at the end of the corridor. “It’s wild out there.”

Outside, the courtyard was lit erratically by fretful torchlight. Trunswick guards fought with over a dozen people without uniforms — the former prisoners of the Howling House. Spirit animals skirmished and galloped around the edges of the yard. Mastiffs milled underfoot.

Briggan pressed up against the back of Conor’s leg, pushing him outside, and Conor thought: *This is madness.*

Finn and another man ran up to them. Even in the dim light, Conor could see that the other man was tattered and haggard. Conor had been imprisoned for just a few hours. It was clear the other man’s imprisonment had lasted much longer.

“Hurry,” Finn urged. “Follow me! They can’t cover us long.”

“Cover us?” Conor echoed. His eyes roamed over the fighting. “We have to help!”

The haggard man shook his head. “No. Briggan and the others must escape from here. You are meant for more than this.”

Just then, one of the mastiffs jumped, lurching heavily into the haggard man’s side. As he turned to face it, another savagely bared its slobbery teeth before lunging for his neck. Meilin immediately turned to help him, but Finn seized her arm.

“You heard what he wanted. Don’t make him fight for nothing,” he snapped. “Our goal is the talisman. Their goal is to allow us to pursue that goal.”

Another man ran up to attack the mastiffs. But the haggard man didn't get back up.

"They want you out of here," Finn hissed, dragging Meilin away. "I'm getting you out of here. I said *follow me*."

It felt wrong to leave the Greencloak supporters behind, even if they wanted the Four Fallen to escape.

This is wrong, Conor thought. If we're so important, why can't we make a difference now? What makes us any better than these men and women?

As they threaded through the fighting, Meilin blocked blows and Rollan ducked under swinging staffs. Everything smelled like burning wood and sweat. A rabbit bounded by them. A small bear clawed on another side. Conor realized that these must be the spirit animals of the captured Greencloaks and their supporters from the Howling House. Individually, the animals wanted to help. But as a group, they had no plan or order. It wasn't like Conor and the others — at least they'd had some training to work together.

If only they'd had a way to formulate a plan before all of this, Conor thought.

Just then, a guard dragged Conor to a stop by his cloak. Conor jerked and tugged, but the guard kept pulling him closer. Conor's boots skidded across the dirt courtyard. He was much smaller than his assailant.

"Rollan! Meilin!" he shouted. But the commotion drowned out his voice. The others hadn't even noticed that he'd been apprehended.

The guard flipped out a stubby, sharp sword. The look on his face was branded in Conor's mind. This was not a training exercise.

This man was about to kill him.

But I'm just a boy, Conor thought.

There was no trace of mercy in the guard's eyes.

"Briggan!" Conor cried out desperately.

The wolf pivoted. But he was too far away —

A woman struck the guard with a soaked piece of wood. For a bare moment, his expression didn't change. His sword was still poised over Conor. But then the guard's eyes went blank and he slumped to his knees.

All of the breath escaped from Conor's lungs.

The woman with the piece of wood threw her arms around Conor and dragged him to her in a hug.

"Conor!" she said. Her voice was so familiar. As Briggan bounded breathlessly to Conor's side, Conor got a good look at his savior's face. His mother!

Like all the prisoners, she was tattered and careworn, but her appearance couldn't get in the way of Conor's relief. She was alive.

"Mother!" He hugged her tightly. His head was a clutter of images: that man's face as he prepared to kill Conor, the Greencloak supporter being attacked by the mastiffs, and even Finn's hands trembling as he tried to open the lock. His mother was so skinny too. "I —"

"I know," she replied. "But there's no time. You need to go! It isn't safe here for Greencloaks anymore. They even . . . even Isilla is gone."

"But th-this is wrong," Conor finally stammered, shocked to hear of the gentle Greencloak who had presided over his Nectar Ceremony. She'd been a revered figure in Trunswick for as long as he could remember. "I don't want to leave you behind. Come with us."

"I can't," his mother said. "Your father and brothers still need me."

The others had finally noticed Conor's detainment, and they struggled to fight their way back to him. Nearby, Abeke and Uraza fought with two of the mastiffs. Overhead, a seagull, someone's spirit animal, circled and screamed.

Madness, Conor thought again. Their odds were technically better than in that forest battle, but in this chaos, the Greencloaks were doomed.

"How can I help?" he asked desperately.

"Did you get my letter? You've made us all so proud, Conor! You called Briggan, and surely there was a reason. Briggan was a great leader. You're good and wise. Do what you feel is right. You always do what's right."

"But I don't *know* what is right!"

His mother hugged him again. "Do what is right in your heart, Conor."

Conor hesitated. He was certain that if they left, all these Greencloak supporters would give their lives to shield them. Maybe they were okay with that. But he wasn't. He couldn't be. He just couldn't. Like Lady Evelyn had pointed out, he was a guardian. He couldn't just stay, though, either. Then they would all die. What was right in his heart?

He didn't know.

"Briggan," Conor said. He buried his hand in the wolf's ruff. "Can we help them? They *need* us."

What this group needed was a leader, he knew. He just didn't know if he and Briggan were ready to be leaders yet. Well, he knew Briggan was ready. He just didn't know if *he* was.

The wolf's ears pricked. He surveyed the chaos. Conor did too, and as he did, he saw that even worse was in store for them. The Earl of Trunswick's white horse was making its way jauntily down the streets toward the courtyard. The earl sat high on its back, his powerful lynx spirit animal

lumbering beside him. He was riding in a leisurely fashion, as if he had come to the same conclusion Conor had: The Greencloak supporters had no chance.

This was the Fallens' last chance to run.

Conor and Briggan met each other's eyes. This time, neither of them looked away.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Conor shouted, "Meilin! Rollan! Abeke!"

When he was sure he'd caught their attention, he gestured wildly for them to join him.

Meilin reached him first. "Come on! Let's go."

"We're helping," Conor said. "It's what we're meant to do."

Conor's mother nodded. She stepped back, tightening her hands on the piece of wood she'd used to hit the guard.

"What did you have in mind?" Rollan asked.

"Training room, like we practiced. Find weapons where we can and fight as a team."

He didn't have to say it twice. Rollan brandished his knife, Meilin put up her fists, and Abeke crouched low beside Uraza. Briggan tipped back his head and let out a long, cool howl. The sound pierced the fighting. It raised the hair on the back of Conor's neck and on his arms. Every spirit animal there turned all attention to the wolf.

In that brief silence, Conor shouted, "Greencloaks! Attack!"

They moved forward as one creature. Uraza slunk low before them, Briggan charged beside them, and Essix swept by overhead. They threw themselves into the battle. But not as four people fighting four separate targets. As a single entity dispatching one enemy at a time and then moving on to the next.

Rollan fought with his dagger. Abeke brandished a torch. Conor swept up a shovel from a cart near the blacksmith's. Meilin still preferred to fight bare-handed.

It didn't take long for their efforts to catch the eyes of the other Greencloak supporters. The first to catch on had been fighting with only the help of her spirit animal, a goat. But when she saw the four of them battling as a team, she leaped in behind them. Then a man with an owl. Then a young man with no visible spirit animal. When they saw how the Fallen had found weapons and worked together, they began doing the same.

It was working. The cacophony was dimming. The guards were falling back. The mastiffs were finished.

We're doing it, Briggan! Conor thought fiercely. He could feel the wolf's power surging through him, giving him strength. It was like he was a wolf himself. He was faster, stronger, sharper. This was what the bond could be.

They were winning.

Then the Earl of Trunswick's voice rang over the courtyard.

"If you want this man to live, I suggest you lay down your weapons!"

In the uneven torchlight, the Earl of Trunswick stood on an auction block at the other side of the courtyard. Finn stood in his grasp. The earl's sword was pressed against his throat, and his lynx prowled the block, as if daring anyone to intervene.

The fighting stopped. The only sound was that of several people trying to catch their breath.

Finn's voice was softer than the earl's, but in that ragged quiet, it was just as audible. "Go. Don't listen to him! Just go!"

Conor's heart ached. His mother nodded at him. *Just go!*

All the other Greencloak supporters were watching Conor, Rollan, Abeke, and Meilin to see what their next move was. There were few enough guards that the supporters would have been able to take them on easily if the earl hadn't had Finn hostage.

"If you go," the earl warned with the familiar Trunswick jeer in his voice, "I won't just kill him now. I'll put him back where he belongs. In the Howling House! Don't worry, Finn Cooley! We'll burn that troubled bond out of you yet!"

Finn's hands shook, just as they had inside the Howling House. But when he spoke it was with a steady voice. "*Go*. This is bigger than me!"

Meilin hissed, "We can't leave him."

The earl traced the edge of his sword against Finn's skin. A shallow wound appeared, a few beads of blood drawing a line across his neck.

Finn pressed his lips together. He looked straight at Conor. "Take the rest of them out of here."

Conor needed a plan, but there was no plan. Meilin's agonized face meant that she didn't have one either. Rollan and Abeke shook their heads. His mother's eyebrows pulled together. She was in over her head.

Was this how it had to end? Handing Finn over to their enemy?

Suddenly a wall of flame appeared. It roared and spat and devoured as it hurtled across the cobblestones. Straight in the direction of the earl and Finn. It was so out of place that it took Conor a long second to realize what it was. A cart, piled high with burning straw. Smoke rolled off it in great, choking clouds.

Conor searched the courtyard's edge to see who had set the cart in motion. A small figure caught his eye. Dawson Trunswick, Devin's younger brother. When he saw that Conor had spotted him, he nodded in a nervous way and vanished into the blackness.

The cart blasted toward the auction block. The earl and his lynx leaped off the side to save their skins. Finn leaped the other way. He plunged through the blinding smoke toward the kids while the

earl cursed on the other side of the cloud.

“Run!” Conor’s mother shouted as Finn reached them. She touched Conor’s face. “Now’s the time to run, my son! We’ll cover you. Take Finn and go!”

Blaring through the smoke, the earl roared furiously. There were words in it, but they were lost in his rage.

“Thank you . . .” Conor whispered to his mother. “Thank you!” he called louder, turning to the Greencloak supporters.

“Long live the true Great Beasts!” someone shouted.

The rest of the supporters echoed it. His mother’s smile was a proud thing indeed.

Conor’s heart swelled.

Then the supporters turned back to the smoke, weapons out, ready for the remaining guards.

The kids ran for it. In the back of Conor’s head was the thought that it was lucky, or strange, that Zerif and the other children hadn’t made an appearance to help the Trunswick guards, but he was too relieved to be making a getaway to think long on it. If they got out of Trunswick alive, he could devote more time to wondering if their absence was due to cowardice or strategy.

But for now: They ran.

The sounds of battle rose again in the courtyard, but no one emerged to follow them. Their allies were holding back the guards.

Soon there was no sound except for the noise of their footfalls slapping on the stones. Then the scuff of their boots on the bare ground beside the Trunswick wall. And then, as they ran into the surrounding pastures, there was no sound at all.

Finn made a wordless gesture, and they all followed him into the blackest of nights.



FINN CONTINUED TO SAVE THEIR LIVES. ROLLAN, HAVING considerable experience being chased, was fairly certain that the group's escape from Trunswick was thrilling but temporary. After all, he'd seen the smug Earl of Trunswick. More important, he'd seen the Earl of Trunswick's horse. Despite Rollan's testy relationship with his former mount, he was well aware that most people were faster on horseback than on foot.

But the Trunswick guards didn't catch up with them.

This was because Finn led them on an untraceable path. Close to Trunswick, he walked them through rivers to keep from leaving scent trails for hounds to track. After they'd put some distance between Trunswick and themselves, he led them into a strange, boulder-filled forest that no horse could enter. Tree branches hung as low as Rollan's waist. The rocks were covered with perpetually damp moss that ripped free if he wasn't careful as he climbed.

They walked and walked, over stranger and stranger trails. The more foreign the surroundings grew, the more comfortable Finn seemed to become. After he seemed satisfied that their path had been obscured enough, he scratched maps in the dirt with a stick and constructed shortcuts, mumbling to himself as he thought.

Which was how Rollan found himself hiking through deceptively friendly-looking green mountains, a rope around his waist connecting him to the next person in line, who also had a rope around *their* waist to the *next* person in line, and so on. The idea was that if Rollan fell, he'd have a safety catch. Rollan thought it was more likely that if he went down, they were all going down. But he guessed there was some comfort in the promise of company on the way down the mountainside.

As they traveled, Finn taught them an ancient Northern Euran method of sending coded messages.

“This is how you spell *Abeke*,” Finn explained. He’d tied a mysterious number of knots into a ribbon. It didn’t make much sense to Rollan, nor, Rollan noticed with some satisfaction, to Conor (who had been moping about since they left Trunswick anyway). Abeke and Meilin looked on very keenly, however. Finn continued, “You would just tie this ribbon onto the legs of a gilded pigeon from Trunswick and let it go. It will fly back to its home with your message.”

Rollan couldn’t think of anyone at the moment that he would send a message to. Possibly he could just write *Dear Mother, thanks for nothing*, and send that bird in the general direction of Amaya.

They also talked about what Zerif had said about the Bile. At the news that the spirit animal bond could be forced, Conor’s face became pensive, but Rollan wondered if it would really be such a bad thing if people could choose what sort of animal they had to live with for the rest of their lives. He didn’t say it out loud, though. He could tell by the others’ faces that it wouldn’t be a popular opinion.

They hiked for what felt like weeks, although it was really just days. Rollan ate all the interesting food in his pack, and then all the boring food, and had finally started in on the unappealing food. Meanwhile, the landscape grew harsher and more unforgiving. The mountains became more gray and less green, with savage rocks biting up through the grass. The fields that stretched below turned dry gold and purple, beautiful but unsatisfying for any livestock. They passed no towns, no farms, no houses, no people.

As the food ran low and the landscape became more bleak, Finn became straighter and stronger. His chin was up and his white hair seemed to mark him as different and special instead of defeated and war-torn. This part of Eura seemed to feed him.

It wasn’t feeding Rollan, though. He reckoned it was probably time to make peace with the probability of starving to death.

Then, on the day Rollan ate his last piece of jerky, they came to Glengavin.

Like Trunswick, it was surrounded by a stone wall, which they could see over from their high vantage point. But that was where the similarities between the cities ended.

For all its old-fashioned details, Trunswick had reminded Rollan a lot of the cities in Amaya. Those cities were all skinny streets and crowded buildings, and people using the roads to relieve themselves, and flies collected on top of things that used to be food. Merchants and thieves and drunkards. And bundles of filthy orphans like himself, of course. Cities were full of opportunities, most of them opportunities for bad things to happen to you. And they all sort of looked the same to Rollan. No matter how different a city’s architectural flesh was, he could see the bones of desperation underneath.

But not Glengavin. In the center was a massive stone building. A fortress, or castle. Or perhaps *palace* was the best word for it. An older central bit had clearly been built with defense in mind. But

the extensive stone wings on either side had clearly been constructed for beauty and luxury. They were studded with stained-glass windows like jewels. Gargoyles and carvings hung from every stone overhang. Deep blue flags flapped from poles and hung beside doors.

It was shockingly different from the rugged landscape outside the wall.

“Am I really awake?” Conor asked. “It looks like a dream.”

Rumfuss, Rollan just thought. This looked like a place a Great Beast would be.

Abeke, the small black cat perched on her shoulders and Uraza standing by her side, just shook her head wordlessly.

Meilin and the panda regarded Glengavin pensively. “The gardens remind me of home,” she said with uncharacteristic wistfulness.

The stone manor was surrounded by acres of manicured plants and crushed gravel paths. Every bush was trimmed into a geometric shape. Every rose was pleasingly groomed. Lavender plants cut into squares led the way to the front entry.

The entire thing made Rollan feel a little strange inside. Since he’d become a full-time orphan, he had worked pretty hard to never be impressed by anything — hard to get disappointed that way — but he thought, maybe, he was impressed. Or excited even. Or possibly he was just hungry.

“Lady Evelyn said the Lord of Glengavin would welcome us,” Conor said dubiously.

“Yeah, we saw how well that went back in Trunswick,” Rollan replied.

“Maybe you could send Essix ahead,” Finn suggested. “She might be able to let us know if she thinks something is amiss.”

Rollan tipped his head back. Essix was sailing around overhead as usual. Within earshot. Not that that guaranteed she’d comply.

Meilin had crossed her arms and turned to stare at him expectantly.

Great, he thought. *An audience always makes this easier.*

Really casually, he said, “Hey. Essix.”

The falcon kept circling. Her head was turned a little bit toward his voice, though. She heard him. But she wasn’t going to do anything about it.

A little louder, Rollan called, “Essix.”

Still more circling.

Now they were all looking at him.

“Problems?” Meilin asked, sweetly sarcastic.

“No,” Rollan replied. He twirled his hand as if this is how he had meant it to go. “I don’t tell her what to do. She doesn’t tell me what to do. We have a great bond. Awesome. You know what? I’m going to go check out Glengavin myself.”

Hiding his annoyance, he ripped loose the knotted rope around his waist and began to slip down the slope toward the wall. He only made it a few feet before Essix cried out and flapped off ahead of him.

Finn laughed — a rare sound from him. “Well, you two contrary animals are well matched, aren’t you?”

“Oh, you know,” Rollan said. “We like to keep the relationship fresh.”

“It seems pretty fresh all right,” Meilin murmured.

With a wrinkle of his nose, Rollan replied, “I’m going to choose to be the better man here and not say anything about how *fresh* you and your spirit animal smell.” Meilin actually didn’t smell — Rollan suspected girls didn’t sweat — but the panda did have a distinct musky odor.

Rather arch, she countered, “Really? That’s what you have? *Smells* bad?”

“We all could use a bath,” Finn cut in. “Hopefully the welcome at Glengavin will be warm enough to afford us such luxuries.”

It seemed as if that might be a possibility too, because when Essix returned, she looked unconcerned. Reassured, they approached the gate. Over it stretched a plaque that read: THREE UNDENIABLE TRUTHS: LOVE, DEATH, AND THE LAW OF GLENGAVIN, KNOW ALL THREE WELL.

Rollan felt it wasn’t the most inspirational of mottos. Love was all right, he thought, but death wasn’t incredibly tempting. It was hard to say which side the Law of Glengavin came down on, but he guessed it probably wasn’t the hugging one.

The three guards, however, were not just pleasant, but actually excited to see them. After only the briefest of explanations from Finn, the group was brought inside.

“We are proud to welcome you to Glengavin,” one of the guards said. He had an enormous red beard and equally enormous red eyebrows. Rollan thought that they could all take cover in his facial hair in the event of an emergency. Even more impressive than his beard, however, was his leather armor. It was more intricate than any leatherwork Rollan had ever seen. Every inch was etched with tangled artwork, much like Finn’s tattoos. It seemed like the sort of thing that should be displayed on a shelf, not worn every day. Both guards also wore tartan kilts and leather sporrans — fancy pouches that hung low around their waists. Short knives rested in scabbards tied at their ankles.

War is so pretty here, Rollan thought. He thought again of that plaque over the gate.

“We had heard rumors of four heroes,” the hairy guard said. “But we’d heard that one of them had summoned a black wildcat.”

“You heard wrong,” Meilin said coldly. “As you can tell, these animals are the Four Fallen.”

Finn, in a much milder voice, said, “There is much darkness on the move too. Where there are heroes, there are always villains. We’d all be wise to be wary of opportunists.”

“Oh, aye,” agreed the red-bearded guard, quite amiable. He reached to pet the black cat Abeke held. “This isn’t a Great Beast.”

“No,” Abeke said. “Her name is Kunaya.”

“You *named* her?” demanded Meilin, pressing her hand to her face.

“Does she have special powers?” the guard asked.

Meilin made a sour face. “Shedding. Clawing. Being heavy.”

Abeke merely smiled mysteriously. She was good at that. So was Uraza. Actually, so was the little black cat Kunaya. Smiling mysteriously was a rather feline magical power.

Rollan didn’t trust cats, but he thought they were all right. Better than weasels.

A messenger made his way to them, a little out of breath. “Lord MacDonnell is pleased to welcome the heroes! He is throwing a banquet in your honor tonight. Would you like to see your rooms?”

The four kids looked at each other, surprised. They couldn’t have asked for a more opposite experience from Trunswick.

Rollan’s stomach growled. Banquet!

The messenger mistook their silence. “They are quite nice rooms,” he promised quickly. “No comfort is wanting!”

“Oh, no,” Finn said. “It’s just . . .”

Rollan finished, “It’s nice to have such a *warm welcome*.”

As they were led toward the main castle, Rollan glanced over his shoulder. The plaque about the three truths wasn’t visible from this side, but he hadn’t forgotten it.



It was indeed a warm welcome. Rollan and Conor were given a room to share. Though they were from very different backgrounds, both of them were equally stunned by the size of it. And the beds! — great poster beds, with a pillar at each corner supporting a draping fabric ceiling. One for each boy. Most inns in Amaya didn’t even have two beds in a room, and when they did, it was only to cram five or six people — sometimes strangers — into the same space. And there was a private washbasin with soft cloths beside it. Fresh clothing had also been laid near the washbasin, two choices of outfits for each boy. One was a deep green surcoat and kilt that matched the guards. The other was a more standard-issue Euran surcoat and leggings.

“No way am I wearing that kilt,” Rollan observed.

Conor touched the tartan wool fabric. “I think it’s interesting. Why not?”

“Too much like a uniform. You know how I feel about those. What did you think of that plaque over the gate?”

“Er, remind me what it said again?” Conor asked sheepishly, and Rollan remembered with a pang of regret that the boy was not a talented reader.

“Something about the Law of Glengavin. Death and hugging.”

Conor shrugged. “Seems like an orderly place. Makes sense they’d want people to obey the law. Why, are you feeling anything about it?”

After the dismal experience of asking Essix to check out Glengavin, Rollan had almost forgotten about her otherworldly powers of observation. It felt like a long time since they’d had a moment of connection.

“I just don’t like rules,” Rollan answered finally. “They’re like uniforms.”

The boys continued poking around in the room. All the furniture was very fancy, and probably expensive, but that impressed Rollan less than the pillows.

“Probably one thousand geese were plucked to fill this thing,” he told Conor, burying his face into it. It was a cloud of indistinct perfection.

“Two thousand,” Conor replied drowsily. Neither boy had had a decent night’s sleep since well before Trunswick. “Did you see the washbasin? You can get rid of your fresh smell.”

He made a face as he said it so that Rollan knew he was joking about Rollan’s comment to Meilin earlier.

“Oh, sure, I’ll get right on that.”

But neither of them did. Instead, they let the pillows suffocate them for a few hours until a messenger woke them for the banquet. They washed and dressed before following another servant. The great hall was as richly decorated as the gardens. A woman in a brilliant dress played a skin-headed drum. A man in a matching tunic played a set of humming bagpipes. A younger teen played a carved wooden harp. The sound beat up the tapestry-covered walls.

“Look at this place,” Conor said to Rollan.

“Look at *you*,” Rollan replied. Conor had opted for the kilt. Rollan had not.

Flushing, Conor said, “It seemed polite.”

Polite was never really on Rollan’s list of priorities.

“If we have to make a speedy escape and you have to do it in that skirt, that’s all on you,” Rollan whispered.

As the bagpipes buzzed a merry jig, Meilin and Abeke entered the hall. Both looked startlingly different in the lush green surcoats that had been provided. Meilin in particular looked stunning and odd. It took Rollan a moment to realize that it was because it had been a long time since he’d seen her *clean*.

The two girls joined them. Meilin's eyes lingered on Rollan for a long moment before finding Essix. The falcon perched on an unused torch holder and ran her beak through the feathers on her leg.

"Rollan, you look *clean*," Meilin said. Her gaze still seemed to linger on him a little longer than usual, a fact that didn't bother Rollan a bit.

"Hey," Conor protested.

"Oh," Meilin added hurriedly, "you do too. The green, uh, brings out your eyes. It's nice to be staying somewhere *civilized*."

"More civilized than I'm used to. Any sign of Rumfuss?" Conor asked.

Rollan said, "Yeah, any boars running around the castle?"

"Actually," Abeke pointed out, "there is a tapestry with a boar on it in the hall near our room. I think it is Rumfuss. I asked the servant who led us here, and she said he was the boar in the gardens — but nothing more."

"Boar in the garden?" Meilin echoed. "She wouldn't say anything more?"

"She said it was against the law for servants to carry on with guests."

"That's a funny law," Rollan said.

"This place seems to have a lot of them," Abeke agreed. "I tried to leave our door open for some air and one of the guards told me that only the lord or the lord's family was allowed to leave their doors open. They said it was a privilege."

Rollan sniffed indignantly. "That seems stupid."

Meilin broke in. "It's exotic. But I'm sure Zhong's customs would seem strange to an outsider as well."

"That's true," Abeke agreed. "Nilo is quite different from Eura or Amaya, especially some of the more remote villages. At least it is pleasant here."

It was indeed pleasant. Conor asked, "Where's Finn?"

"Talking to Lord MacDonnell, I believe," Meilin answered. "The Lord of Glengavin."

Rollan's stomach growled loud enough for it to be heard over the music.

Abeke looked sympathetic. "Have you seen the food?"

Long tables lined the edges of the room. One sat higher than the others on a raised platform. All the chairs were fancy at that higher table, but the fanciest was a gold-painted one, like a throne. The other tables were piled with food. There were cakes soaked in sugar syrup and potatoes glazed with butter. Fruit swam in cream. Oatcakes formed teetering stacks. Sausages lay in savory pyramids. Blushing lumps of carrot and rich knobs of beef floated in tureens.

None of the many people in the hall had touched the food yet. They all seemed to be waiting for a cue.

Finn entered the hall with a big, jolly-looking man — Lord MacDonnell. He had a tidily trimmed dark beard and wide-spaced, amused eyes. He wore a kilt and tall wool socks. A great tartan sash draped one shoulder and was pinned at his hip with a dagger-shaped brooch.

Everything about Lord MacDonnell seemed cheerful. A little too obviously cheerful, perhaps. As a street rat, Rollan had learned that a smile could sometimes hide wicked thoughts better than a sneer.

He didn't trust him.

He didn't know why. Probably because he didn't trust anybody. In any case, something in Rollan whispered, *Maybe not everything about him is jolly.*

As if confirming this suspicion, Essix swung down suddenly to perch on Rollan's shoulder. Her talons clung tightly to his leather jerkin. Leaning close to him, her beak parted as she made a soft noise in his ear.

"I know," he hissed. "I'm watching."

But she made another soft noise. And this time, Rollan's vision suddenly clicked into sharper focus. It was as if he had been observing the world in black and white before, and now it was in color. He saw how the servants' postures became more tense now that Lord MacDonnell and Finn had entered the room. He noticed how the musicians hesitated, confirming that they were still wanted. He saw how the two children, a boy and a girl, who walked behind MacDonnell were spitting images of him — the lord's children, surely. He noted that there was no Lady MacDonnell in evidence. He noticed the wrinkle between Lord MacDonnell's eyebrows. He saw the dais where the lord was meant to sit with his children and wife, and he noticed that there was a raised seat for the lord of the castle's spirit animal to rest on. And he noticed that seat was covered with dust.

It was almost too much to notice all at once. He could see with Essix's great eyes, but he still had to process it with Rollan's less-than-great brain. He staggered a bit. Conor grabbed Rollan's arm (how clearly Rollan could observe even Conor, with his worn shepherd's hands). As Rollan swatted at him in protest, Essix flapped from his shoulder. Immediately everything became ordinary again.

The sudden ordinariness was as overpowering as the stunning vision had been. It seemed impossible to go back to seeing things in the usual way after observing the world with Essix's amazing power.

If our bond was better, Rollan wondered, is that how I'd see things all the time?

Finn, Lord MacDonnell, and the two children walked up to Rollan and the others.

"Welcome! I am Lord MacDonnell, and this is my home!" The man had a big, jolly voice to match his big, jolly body. "Greencloaks are always welcome here. Glengavin is a home to all heroes."

Finn murmured a noise of polite gratitude.

“This is my son, Culloden,” Lord MacDonnell said, gesturing to the boy behind him, “and this is my daughter, Shanna.”

Both children bowed. Conor, Meilin, and Abeke bowed back, with Rollan quickly chiming in with a sort-of bow-like movement of his own. Finn then introduced the four kids, adding, “The four Great Beasts need no introduction, I’m sure.”

“No, indeed! Where’s your green, lad?” Lord MacDonnell asked as Rollan glanced around, trying to spot where Essix had suddenly gone to.

Meilin elbowed Rollan. Lord MacDonnell was talking to *him*.

“Oh, that,” Rollan said. “I’m less a member of the Greencloaks and more a member of Let’s-Save-Erdas.”

Lord MacDonnell laughed heartily. “Aren’t we all. Aren’t we all! Shall we eat?”

He clapped his hands.

Instantly, every sound in the hall went silent. Conversation stopped. Not a single footstep shuffled on the stone. The musicians’ hands slapped to dampen their strings.

The quiet was eerie.

Then Lord MacDonnell smiled hugely again and clapped once more.

The musicians scrambled to play a more stately march as he made his way to the feast. Lord MacDonnell plucked a single grape from a platter. Every eye in the room watched as he dropped it in his mouth.

The moment he’d eaten it, conversation buzzed back up again and everyone moved to collect food for themselves. This must be another law. How tense that silence had been. Rollan wondered what the penalty was for finding yourself on the wrong side of the Law of Glengavin.

Rollan and Meilin hung back as Finn, Conor, and Abeke helped themselves.

“This is weird,” Rollan said.

“I think it’s great,” Meilin said. “Look how well-run this is. Most banquets and parties are disasters. This runs like an army. And his children are perfect.”

“Perfect minions,” replied Rollan, watching them. The two children followed just behind Lord MacDonnell, nodding when spoken to.

“That’s respect,” Meilin said. “I wouldn’t expect *you* to recognize it.”

“Oh, don’t pull rank on me now —” started Rollan. He broke off as Lord MacDonnell headed back their way.

“Aren’t you two going to enjoy the feast?” Lord MacDonnell boomed in a pleasant baritone. “The salmon is divine.”

“We were just admiring it,” Meilin said smoothly. “And also how well your children obey.”

Rollan was about to open his mouth to point out that he had not been admiring that particular aspect of the night, but Meilin pinched his elbow, out of sight of Lord MacDonnell. Rollan swallowed his words.

“Well, my castle, my law!” Lord MacDonnell said with a laugh.

The image of the perfect guest, Meilin asked him, “Will you tell me more about how you run this banquet?”

She was so clever at disguising her true emotions that even Rollan couldn't tell if her interest was manufactured or genuine. She and Lord MacDonnell went to get food together, chatting the entire way.

With a frown, Rollan took a single sausage from the very end of the table and ate it, while simultaneously looking for Essix and surveying the banquet.

His attention was snagged by the musicians. A singer had joined them and they were singing a song that he knew. It was a street song about the Great Beasts that all the urchins in Concorba could sing in their sleep. The verses went through all the Great Beasts in order, the tune annoyingly monotonous, until by the fifteenth and final Great Beast, most listeners were ready to pummel whoever had decided to start the song in the first place.

The musicians played so skillfully, changing up the harmonies in each verse, that Rollan didn't even realize that he had forgotten to be bored until it was over. In fact, it stirred that same strange part in him that the first sight of Glengavin had. This place sure was getting to him.

He told the musicians, “Usually I hate that song.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” the singer said.

“But not this time,” Rollan finished. “You guys are great.”

The singer smiled graciously. “Thank you.”

The teenage harpist piped up, her voice annoyed: “But no one can hear us on the other side of the room. It's too noisy.”

The musicians and Rollan gazed around the great hall. The arched ceiling should have been a good soundboard for the music, but the thick tapestries on the wall swallowed all sound.

“If you were higher,” Rollan suggested, “the sound would carry better. Above the tapestries. There?”

He pointed to a small, disused balcony.

“Oh, but —” started the singer in a small voice.

“Probably not,” replied the drummer.

“Not this time,” the harpist added.

Rollan was about to comment on their apparent fear of heights when he realized he could see movement on the balcony. It was Essix. At first he thought she was just flapping for a takeoff. But then

her wings fluttered even more violently, and he realized she was trapped somehow. It made him feel strangely fluttery himself. Anxious.

The musicians' gazes followed Rollan.

"Is that Essix?" breathed the harpist.

"Yes," Rollan said, a little grim. "And she seems to be trapped. I need to know the way up to that balcony."

"Oh, but —" started the singer.

"Probably not," replied the drummer.

The harpist said, "No. No, you shouldn't go up there."

"I have to," Rollan said. Their attitude toward the balcony was beginning to make him feel a little uneasy, though. "Why, is it unstable?"

"No," the singer said. He glanced urgently at Lord MacDonnell, who was engaged in conversation at the raised table at the end of the hall. "No one is supposed to stand higher than the lord of the castle. It's the law."

Rollan thought all laws were stupid, but this one was stupider than most. He said, "But I won't be standing. I'm freeing a bird and then coming right down."

The musicians conferred among themselves.

"No," the harpist said finally. "I'll go free her. You're a guest. You shouldn't have to risk it."

"*Risk* it?" echoed Rollan. The sight of Essix flapping was making him feel even more uneasy. "She has to be freed! What if she's hurt? If I'm not supposed to be up there, is he going to do it himself?"

This made all the musicians glance anxiously at Lord MacDonnell.

"I'll just go," the harpist said. Her voice was brave, but her face looked sick. The other musicians placed their hands on her shoulders and nodded. She moved down the wall to a small door. When she opened it, Rollan saw the steep stairs that led up to the balcony. She disappeared inside.

The other musicians muttered, twisting their hands. Rollan didn't get it.

The harpist reappeared on the balcony above them.

The musicians kept fretting.

In just a moment, Essix flapped free of whatever had trapped her on the balcony.

It was barely a minute. No time at all.

The harpist moved back toward the staircase at the wall.

Just then, Lord MacDonnell looked up sharply from his gilded chair. His eyes went right to the balcony. The harpist's face was pale as the moon.

Without taking his gaze from her, Lord MacDonnell clapped. Just once.

Immediately, all sound ceased.

Lord MacDonnell said, “Do my people not know my law?”

The hall was quiet.

“Scribe, what is the sixteenth rule of the hall?”

A squirrely boy at the end of the raised table spoke up. “No one shall sit higher than the lord of the castle.”

Everyone’s eyes were now on the harpist on the elevated balcony.

“Oh, my lord, I didn’t mean it as a dishonor!” she cried. “I was just trying to —”

“My castle,” said Lord MacDonnell. “My law.”

“Please —”

“Demoted!” Lord MacDonnell shouted. “You are no longer the court harpist. Ten years in the kitchen, then beg for my forgiveness.”

“My lord,” begged the harpist as the guards approached the doorway to the balcony. “That harp was made by my father.”

“And you will destroy it right now,” Lord MacDonnell ordered.

“My lord —”

“Did you know my law?”

The harpist hung her head. As Rollan’s heart charged in his chest, she stood there until guards climbed the stairs to fetch her. Limply, she accompanied them and stood before the harp.

“My castle,” repeated Lord MacDonnell. “My law.”

Rollan didn’t need Essix’s supernatural eyesight to see how much the instrument meant to the harpist. He couldn’t bear that she’d known this might happen, and risked it anyway for Essix and him.

Swiftly, Rollan stepped in front of the high table, his hands burning with anger and guilt. He held his chin up high. “It was my fault. She climbed there to free Essix for me.”

Lord MacDonnell raised a dark eyebrow. “Ah, it is the boy who walks by himself.” He didn’t say anything for a moment, and then he said, “There are three true things in this place: love, death, and the Law of Glengavin. Her punishment remains. But for your bravery in taking responsibility, join me here at the knights’ table. Glengavin is a home to heroes and I see that you are becoming one.”

Rollan gritted his teeth. The last thing he wanted was to accept a reward for his stupidity. This was all his fault.

But Meilin, seated at one of the other tables, found his gaze. Her eyes flashed. It was the visual equivalent of her pinching him before. It meant *Just do it!*

She was probably right. A nobleman who just ruined a girl’s life for climbing onto a balcony probably could think of something worse for an orphan who refused to sit at his table.

Rollan looked over his shoulder at the slump-shouldered singer. His blood was starting to boil, but he tamped it down. *One day, he thought, nobles won't be able to do this to us.*

But until then, he sat at Lord MacDonnell's right hand, three seats away from him. Directly next to the noble was his son, Culloden, eating quietly. And then was Shanna, making shapes in her potatoes. Then Rollan.

In front of them, the guards stood by as the harpist smashed her own harp. Tears ran down her face and the splinters of the instrument cut her hands, but she didn't complain anymore.

Then, as she was led away to the kitchen with slumped shoulders and bloody hands, Lord MacDonnell muttered, as if to himself, "My castle. My law."



THAT NIGHT, IN THE WEIRD QUIET OF A BEAUTIFUL, VAST guest room in Glengavin, Conor dreamed of falling out the window into the garden. He heard the tune the musicians had been playing right before Lord MacDonnell had punished the harpist. The song turned discordant and suddenly he saw an animal moving between the manicured perfection of the green gardens. A boar. It was huge and terrifying, all bristles and tusks. When it looked over its shoulder at him, Conor instinctively knew it was no ordinary boar.

“Rumfuss!” he called. “I need to talk to you!”

The boar immediately ran through the bushes and into the brushy wild outside of the gardens. The landscape here was scruffy and rocky, with lots of nooks and crannies for smaller animals to hide in. But Rumfuss didn’t seem interested in hiding. Instead, the boar broke into an ungainly gallop and led Conor in a lopsided figure eight, past part of the castle.

“Wait!” Conor called again.

Suddenly another animal darted in front of him, through a curtain of purple wisteria. It was an enormous hare — even in the dream it felt familiar, as if Conor had dreamed it before. Its powerful hind legs propelled it one way and then the other. It was running away from Glengavin. When Conor turned back to Rumfuss, the boar was gone.

“Wolf boy, wake up!”

It took Conor a moment to realize the hissed voice came from Rollan in the next bed over. He blinked in the darkness.

“Are you awake?” Rollan whispered. “There’s something outside the window.”

Conor quietly rolled over to listen. Rollan's eyes glistened in the faint light from outside. Heavy curtains blocked most of the light and all the landscape, but the other boy was right. Something was shuffling outside the window. It couldn't be anything good — their room was four stories above the ground and there was no balcony.

Sliding out of bed, Conor gestured to Briggan. The wolf climbed to his feet and faced the window. His hackles prickled as another scraping sound came from outside.

The window was cracked and the curtains moved slightly.

Rollan swung his feet silently over the edge of his bed and pulled a dagger from under his pillow. He held up five fingers, then four, then three. Counting down.

When he got to one, both he and Conor grabbed a curtain and pulled them open.

A figure stood on the sill, wild-haired and ferocious. Wind tore at the person's clothing. The figure balanced precariously on the window ledge. There was nothing behind but dozens of feet of open air.

Conor gasped, "Meilin?"

Because it *was* Meilin. She swayed on the edge of the window. Her eyes were fast shut, her mouth moving. Tears coursed down her cheeks. She barely looked like herself.

"She's sleepwalking!" Conor exclaimed, horrified. "Grab her!"

Rollan and Conor each seized an arm, pulling her into the room. When she landed on the floor with an unceremonious crash, she moaned and shook her head.

"Wake up," Conor said gently, shaking her shoulder.

It was strange to see her face with tears on it. It must be difficult to know your father was missing and your home city was destroyed. To belong somewhere, and then suddenly to not.

Rollan leaned over her too, concern written on his face. But when he caught Conor looking, Rollan quickly slapped a smirk on his face and quipped, "Yep, wakey wakey."

Retrieving a pitcher of water from beside his bed, he dumped it over her. With a muffled shriek, Meilin leaped from the ground. She pinned Rollan against the wall, her hand against his throat, her hair dripping.

"I was *awake*," she snapped. "Conor woke me."

Rollan grinned saucily. "I know."

She slapped him. Then, to Conor, she said, "Thank you for pulling me inside."

"Hey, I helped," Rollan protested, but she ignored him.

"What happened?" Conor asked uncertainly. "What were you doing out there?"

Meilin stoked the fireplace to give them some more light, and then returned to the window. Now that she was inside, she seemed a little undone by the dizzying height. She gestured to the next window over. "Our room is over there. I must have been sleepwalking. I was dreaming . . ."

“Were you dreaming of being a spider?” Rollan asked. He joined them at the window, Meilin’s slap mark bright on his cheek. “Because you must have had sticky feet to get from there to here.”

“No, there’s a tiny ledge,” Conor pointed out. “You’re lucky you didn’t fall, Meilin. I can’t believe you did that while asleep.” He didn’t want to remark on the tear marks still visible on her face, because the idea of pointing them out seemed embarrassing to both him and her. But he was certain that Meilin would never cry while awake.

Rollan opened his mouth and then shut it again. Meilin’s furious face dared him to say anything.

“I am going back to my bed,” Rollan said, “because it is good and true and would never lie to me. You two can do what you like.”

“That’s a good idea,” Meilin said as he climbed back into his bed. “Tomorrow we have a long day ahead of us, looking for Rumpfuss.” She placed her hand on the doorknob.

“Be careful,” Conor warned.

Rollan jerked his blanket down from his chin. “Are you sure you don’t want to crawl back out of the window?”

Meilin gave him a withering look and slipped back out into the hall.

Rollan disappeared back down into his pillows. He muttered, “My castle, my law.”



12

VOICES

THE FIRST THING ABEKE NOTICED WHEN SHE WOKE UP WAS that it was not quite morning. The room was still blue-edged and black-shadowed, though birds sang thinly outside. The second thing she noticed was that the door was cracked open, and what looked like Uraza’s tail was disappearing through it. Presumably following the rest of Uraza.

As Abeke pushed herself up and blinked, trying to decide if she had seen the leopard leave, she heard a faint *pad-pad-pad-pad* and saw Kunaya’s dark form trot out into the hall too.

“*Uraza!*” hissed Abeke, shooting a glance at the lump that was Meilin’s sleeping form. This was not the place to go wandering. But the leopard didn’t return.

“Mwuwuh?” Meilin asked the room sleepily.

“Uraza’s in the hall,” Abeke replied in a hushed whisper. “I’m going to get her.”

“Mwuf. Need help?” Even half-asleep, Meilin sounded a little suspicious of Abeke creeping out of the room so early.

“I am all right!”

“Mwufay.” The other girl turned back into her pillow.

Abeke headed down the hall. She could smell the faint scent of bread baking — the bakers up early. Maybe that was what had lured the big cat out of the room. It took her a moment to glimpse the forms of the two cats disappearing around a corner.

“Uraza!” she hissed once more. But she didn’t dare to do it again. If there was a law against leaving your bedroom door open, surely there was a law against sneaking around while no one else was up. She had no choice but to slink after the two cats.

Closed doors lined the high-ceilinged hall, and every few yards was an alcove containing something unexpected and magical: a delicate water fountain trailing water over carvings, a cage of sleeping canaries, a pillowed chair with lion's paws, a tree covered with white blossoms.

Uraza paused at the next corner, her lavender eyes keen. She wanted the girl to know that she wasn't trying to be disobedient. This was no helter-skelter chase through a castle. This time, Uraza was leading her.

Crouching low, Abeke silently caught up to Uraza. Together, the two cats and the girl made their way past the black rectangles of closed doors. From the way the leopard stalked — pausing every few steps — it seemed she wasn't quite sure where she was going or what she was looking for.

The hall grew lighter. Gradually Abeke realized she could hear the dull murmur of voices coming from inside one of these many rooms. From the thrashing of Uraza's tail, this was what she had been looking for. They scouted back and forth, trying to get closer, until Abeke found a long, skinny room full of washbasins. Morning light came in a large window at the end, suddenly strong and bright. One wall was lined with animal-headed fountains, each faucet carved with a different species. Cloths, perfumes, and draping robes sat on a long shelf opposite.

Abeke pressed her ear to the washbasin wall, and suddenly the voices came into focus.

“Look,” said a familiar voice, “clearly Lord MacDonnell is a little crazy. But we aren't going to be here long. All we need to do is find Rumfuss and then find the girl and get out of here before he does any more of his crazy ‘my castle, my law’ stuff.”

“How will we persuade Rumfuss to give up his talisman?” asked another voice. This one also sounded familiar, and had a Niloan accent. Suddenly Abeke knew who they were — and why Uraza had been so intent on finding them. Devin and Karmo!

“Give up?” Devin scoffed. “Look at our beasts! We'll take it.”

They must have made it to Glengavin in the night! Abeke leaped back from the wall and out of the washroom. She needed to tell the others immediately.

But as she rounded the corner back to the hall, she was brought up short. She stood face-to-face with Devin Trunswick. Uraza stood nose-to-nose with his black panther, Elda. Behind him stood tall, dark Karmo, and beside him was his huge hammerkop stork, Impundulu. The bird's head and beak were nearly as long as Karmo's arm.

In just a second, Abeke had snatched a large glass bottle of perfume from the table beside her. Makeshift weapon. She *had* been paying attention in the training room back at Greenhaven.

“Ah, Abeke,” Devin said with a clever smile that he seemed to have learned from Zerif. He didn't seem at all concerned by the prospect of getting hit over the head with a perfume bottle. “I don't intend to murder you. We were just talking about you.”

“How did you get in here?” Abeke demanded.

“Glengavin is a hall for heroes,” Devin boomed, clearly mocking Lord MacDonnell. He gestured to his spirit animal, who thrashed her tail. “Elda makes me very popular in Eura.”

“Not in this particular corridor,” Abeke replied. She jerked her chin toward Karmo. “Who is he?”

“This is my friend Karmo,” Devin said. “He’s from Nilo too.”

I know, thought Abeke, with a pang of homesickness. *I heard*.

Karmo’s eyes were narrowed, as if Devin and he weren’t particularly friendly. He said, “I’ve come to see if I can change your mind. Come back to us. Come back to Nilo. Our people need us to be beacons of hope.”

Taken by surprise, she blinked. Was *she* the girl she had heard them talking about? “*What?* I am not coming back. I have seen enough to know who fights for what I believe in. The Greencloaks are the good guys.”

Karmo raised a dark, handsome eyebrow. He was the sort of boy that her sister, Soama, would have been silly over back home. “Are they?”

Abeke nodded. “I am very fortunate that they allowed me to switch sides. They understand the value of mercy, unlike your master, Zerif.”

Devin scoffed. “They would not have killed you, Abeke. You know that. You walk with Uraza. The Greencloaks want you alive.”

Abeke didn’t like this conversation. There wasn’t any chance that she would fight with the Conquerors again, but it awoke all kinds of unpleasant tangled feelings inside her. For a pained moment she thought of Shane, the friend she’d had to leave behind. “You won’t convince me, Devin. My spirit animal chooses the Greencloaks.”

“But is she right?” Karmo broke in gently.

“Of course she is! She’s a Great Beast!” The fierceness of Abeke’s reply made Uraza growl beside her. Abeke could feel the power of Uraza seeping into her, preparing her for a fight. Her nerves danced. Next to Devin, Elda dropped down, tail thrashing even harder, her black fur scuffed up threateningly. Impundulu clawed the floor with one foot. The atmosphere felt charged and dangerous.

“The Great Beasts aren’t always right,” Karmo said. “They may mean well, but just like humans, their decisions are fallible. After all, aren’t you and I here in search of a Great Beast who flees us both?”

Abeke didn’t want to admit that he was right. But Uraza was not like Rumfuss. She’d died standing up for what she believed in.

“Abeke, I came to bring you back so that you and I could lead Nilo to a better future,” Karmo said. He held out a hand. “Come with me?”

He asked in such a mild, kind way. Not at all as if his hammerkop stood threateningly beside him, one foot raised, giant beak parted.

“I have chosen my side,” Abeke said harshly.

Devin shrugged. “Well, you’re coming with us either way. Karmo?”

Abeke swung the perfume bottle just as Uraza sprang at Elda. Devin let out a muffled cry as he blocked the blow. Karmo stood by quite calmly. As Abeke reached up to swing again, Impundulu flapped its wings. Lifting from the ground, the bird punched its legs into Abeke’s abdomen.

There was an arcing flash of light as the bird’s feet touched Abeke. The contact was more than a blow — it was a jolt. Her limbs suddenly went numb. Karmo was on her in a moment, pinning her arms behind her. Kunaya had appeared from nowhere and she wound around Abeke’s legs, mewling piteously. Uraza and Elda fought in the hall, making soft thumps when their bodies hit the walls. Elda was larger, but Uraza was greater. She would win a battle against the black panther . . . but then what? There were still two humans against Abeke, and another spirit animal with strange abilities.

Abeke opened her mouth to shout for help. Devin stuffed one of the cloths into her mouth.

“Put her in passive form,” he told Abeke, “or I will cut your throat.”

She had no choice. She held out her arm pleadingly, and Uraza disappeared in a blitz of light, forming a tattoo on Abeke’s arm, right next to where Karmo’s hand held her in place.

“There was an easier way,” Karmo said into Abeke’s ear.

Devin held out his arm, and Elda immediately vanished into passive form. It was like an instantly obeyed order.

“Don’t look so angry, Abeke,” he said. “You’re going home.”

LORD MACDONNELL

BECAUSE MEILIN LIKED ORDER, SHE LIKED GLENGAVIN. Although the others were horrified by what had happened to the musician the night before, Meilin could see where MacDonnell was coming from. The harpist had known the rule. She could have approached MacDonnell with their predicament and asked for a solution.

“If you like him so well,” Rollan said over an impressive breakfast, “why don’t you convince him to let us go see Rumfuss?”

Meilin daintily bit into a crumpet. She chewed it and swallowed it entirely before answering, “That is my plan.”

Finn, on the other side of the long and mostly empty table, looked up from his own meal. “Hospitality is very important in the North, and if we hope to impress Lord MacDonnell into allowing us access to Rumfuss, we must convince him that we are worthy. Where’s Abeke?”

Meilin had just been wondering this herself. Abeke had not returned after going after Uraza this morning. It was possible she’d gotten into trouble. But it was also possible that Abeke was hunting for Rumfuss on her own or otherwise doing something for the Conquerors.

Meilin didn’t know how long it would take for her to trust Abeke. All she knew was that it hadn’t happened yet.

“She went out this morning and hasn’t come back yet.”

Finn narrowed his eyes. “That seems troubling. Meilin, why don’t you, Conor, and Rollan go speak to MacDonnell while I look for Abeke? I can move about the castle more safely than you three; I know more of the customs.”

“And what is it you want us to do?” Rollan demanded. “Be *charming*?”

As Lord MacDonnell entered the room, Meilin stood up and patted her hair. “I don’t have a problem with that.” She called loudly, “Lord MacDonnell! Good morning!”

Behind her back, she gestured for the others to join her.

MacDonnell seemed pleased to see them. He boomed, “How are you liking that kilt, Conor? It looks fine on you! You’d be a good addition to Glengavin. You and your wolf.”

“Briggan is not really mine, my lord,” Conor said. “If anything, I suppose I’m his.”

“Where is he at this fine morning?”

Conor held up his arm. Briggan was frozen in mid-flight in the tattoo.

“Let that wolf loose!”

Conor released the wolf with a brilliant flash. Immediately Briggan frisked around him. Playfully, the wolf took Conor’s hand in his mouth. He looked ferocious when he pretended to bite Conor, but he meant it all in good fun.

Meilin glanced up to MacDonnell to see what he thought of this.

The older man’s expression had gone very un-jolly, but it snapped back into good cheer when he noticed Meilin watching. “What’s your surname, boy?”

“You mean my last name?” Conor blushed, and Meilin felt bad for him. “I don’t have one. I’m just a shepherd’s son, my lord.”

“No shame in that,” Lord MacDonnell said. “What’s your father’s name?”

“Fenray.”

“If you were from Glengavin, you’d be Conor MacFenray,” Lord MacDonnell said. “*Mac* means son of.”

Conor tried it. “Conor MacFenray.”

“You could pick any old last name, you know,” Rollan said from just behind them. “Who says you have to have your father’s name? I’d pick something like SuperStrongGuy. Rollan SuperStrongGuy. Or Rollan FALCONMASTER.”

Both Meilin and Conor raised their eyebrows. Rollan was a long way away from being a falconmaster.

With a booming chuckle — always the booming! — Lord MacDonnell led them to an open courtyard in the center of Glengavin. On the grass and under the covered stone walkways, more than forty soldiers in kilts were training. Only, Meilin would not have guessed it was training if Lord MacDonnell hadn’t told them. Because instead of engaging in mock battles, the men copied music into decorated books, practiced harp and lute, and recited ballads at each other. Only a few of them had spirit animals, but when they did, the spirit animals seemed content to help them with these strange tasks. Next to one man, a shaggy Highland cow stood patiently as her human partner used her massive

horns to hold her elaborate knitting. Another man was aided in his harp-playing by a stoat. It plucked the low notes. He plucked the high ones.

Rollan said, “Sweet merciful chicken. What are they training for? Becoming a princess?”

“War,” Lord MacDonnell said.

“War against princesses?”

“War’s useless if you don’t know how to live with peace,” Lord MacDonnell boomed. “Not very long ago, Glengavin had the best soldiers in Eura. But our skill was meaningless. We were almost destroyed by war. All we did was murder each other, and for nothing. Cattle! Glory! We were great warriors, but we didn’t know what to do if we weren’t fighting.”

Meilin raised an eyebrow. Finn would have liked to hear this description. “So you turned to the arts.”

“Exactly,” Lord MacDonnell said. “Now we spend equal time on training in the arts as we do keeping our muscles fit.”

“That’s a sweet story,” Rollan spoke up. “But what about those musicians last night? The ones that are now scrubbing pots?”

Cheeky, Rollan, Meilin thought. Be careful.

But Lord MacDonnell merely said, “Disorder leads to war, and I won’t risk more war. My castle, my law. It’s not difficult to follow the rules.”

They stopped to watch two men who were laughing and playing chess.

Lord MacDonnell said, “Will you young heroes know what to do when the battle is over? You’re spending your childhood saving the world. What happens when it’s saved?”

“We should be so lucky,” Meilin said.

Conor said, “I know what I will do. I will return to my family’s farm with enough money to pay off our debts, and then I will take my place among my brothers as a shepherd, just like my father before me.”

No, Conor, Meilin thought. You’re forgetting Briggan. You can’t take a wolf among the sheep.

Rollan’s eye briefly caught hers, and Meilin knew that he was thinking the same thing.

“My lord,” Meilin said, “speaking of saving the world — the Great Beast, Rumfuss. There’s a rumor he’s locked in your gardens.”

MacDonnell continued to stare at one of the chess players for a moment, then turned to Meilin. “Indeed he is.”

He said this very simply, the same way one might say, “It’s a touch rainy today,” or “I’m wearing new shoes.”

She tried to sound quite collected. “We really would like to speak with him.”

MacDonnell shook his head. “Only I am allowed to hunt in the gardens. Even if your hunt is just for a word with the Great Beast. It’s for the best — he’s a miserable, grumpy creature. He’d likely trample you.”

“Sir, it’s important,” Conor said. “It’s why we’ve come all this way.”

“To collect the talismans. To recapture the power of the Great Beasts. To destroy the invaders.” MacDonnell said all this dismissively, like he didn’t believe it. “Finn told me last night why it is you seek Rumfuss. The Greencloaks are wrong, if you ask me. No man-made machination could possibly fix soured relationships with spirit animals. Sometimes, things have simply gone too wrong.”

“How can you believe that with such conviction?” Meilin asked.

MacDonnell frowned for a moment, then drummed his fingers together. “I’ll tell you a story. When I was a boy, I was cruel and proud. I was the son of a warrior lord. I knew who I was. I knew what I had coming to me.” Lord MacDonnell’s gaze was far away. “I dreamed of the animal I would summon to be my spirit animal. The North is full of animals that would increase my glory. And yet, when my summoning ceremony happened, I didn’t call a hound or a horse or even a fighting badger. I called a hare.”

Meilin remembered her own Nectar Ceremony. She had been so stunned and disappointed to see a panda instead of a more agile animal.

“I was furious,” Lord MacDonnell recalled. “A hare! An overgrown rabbit!” Now he ducked his head, and Meilin realized that his expression was one of shame. He had to consider for a long time before he could continue. “I tormented my spirit animal. At best I dismissed him. At worst I taunted him. I knew I was being terrible, but I didn’t care. Part of me wanted him to lash back at me. To prove his mettle. But he was loyal to a fault — he swallowed my harsh words and did my bidding like a servant rather than a spirit animal.

“One morning, I woke and he was gone. I had driven my spirit animal away.” Lord MacDonnell closed his eyes. “Since then, there is a hole in my heart that nothing can fill. All joys and entertainments seem empty, and I’ll never know what the hare and I might have accomplished together. I am going through the motions of leading my people, but nothing truly matters to me. I’m a shell. A creature that was Lord MacDonnell.”

I will never let that happen to Jhi and me, Meilin vowed. I must treat her better.

“But part of being a leader,” MacDonnell said, straightening a bit, “is thinking about what you want in the future, not what you wanted in the past.” He motioned to the chessboard. “This game teaches that strategy. I train my men to be masters of it, so they might succeed where I have failed.”

“Chess?” Rollan scoffed. “All chess ever taught me is that I should always play cards.”

MacDonnell ignored this and turned to Conor. “Play a round with me?”

Conor's head jerked up, utterly horrified. He stammered, "Oh, I don't . . . I'm not really good at chess."

Lord MacDonnell was already pulling out a chair at one of the unoccupied chess tables. He arranged his kilt all around the chair so that nothing too embarrassing was showing. "As I said, Briggan is a great leader. And this game is a lesson all leaders should learn."

Meilin, not at all convinced, offered, "You can do it." But she was thinking: *Not him!* Conor was the least schooled of any of them, except for maybe Rollan. And at least Rollan had street smarts. What had Conor ever learned of strategy and leadership in a sheep pasture? He was going to blow their chance to hunt Rumfuss.

"You summoned Briggan, Conor. That means your destiny *demand*s that you become a great leader," Lord MacDonnell said. "Begin."

Conor moved a pawn across the beautifully painted chessboard. Lord MacDonnell charged out with a knight. Conor inched out another pawn. Two moves later, one of his pieces fell to Lord MacDonnell. Conor slid his queen out to defend himself. Lord MacDonnell peacefully murdered one of Conor's bishops. Conor threw more pieces in the direction of Lord MacDonnell's king. Lord MacDonnell took several more victims.

Just like that, it was over. Lord MacDonnell checkmated Conor's king. He stood up.

"Not quite, Conor," he said.

I knew it, Meilin thought miserably. *I could have done this with my eyes shut! What is the point of being on a team if you are the strongest one?*

"Please, my lord," Meilin broke in. "We desperately need to speak to Rumfuss. If I could —"

"No," Lord MacDonnell said. "Do not ask me again today."

Just then, Finn burst from the fortress onto the grass of the courtyard. To Meilin's surprise, he didn't have Abeke with him. Instead, he had that absolutely ridiculous black cat, Kunaya.

"Abeke is gone," Finn said. "All I could find was the cat."

Meilin snapped, "I knew it!"

"Look," Finn interrupted. He touched the cat's neck. A piece of string was tied around it — no, not string. Abeke's elephant hair bracelet. Several frantic knots were tied along its length. "A message."

"What does it say?" Conor asked.

Finn's face was serious. "'Help.' And then: 'Devin hunts Rumfuss.'"

HUNTING

“*H*E HUNTS?” MACDONNELL ASKED, VOICE CURIOUS, LIKE HE THOUGHT HE’D MISHEARD THE PUNCH LINE of a joke. Finn repeated what the knot code said. MacDonnell’s face didn’t change, but when he spoke again, his voice had gone dark. “Hunting. In my castle’s gardens, where I alone am permitted to hunt.” He pursed his lips. “They take advantage of my hospitality and break my law.”

“And they have Abeke!” Rollan added, irritated that MacDonnell seemed to find hunting more offensive than kidnapping. He turned to the others. “Why are we standing here? We’ve got to help her.”

“I’m certainly not allowing *more* people to break my law and hunt on my land,” MacDonnell said, as if this should have been obvious. “My soldiers will stop them. Trunswick won’t be allowed to leave Glengavin.”

“He has the wildcat,” Finn said quietly. “Even if you manage to take him, it won’t be without significant losses to your soldiers.” He motioned to the soldiers, who were pretending not to eavesdrop, though they were doing a terrible job — in his distraction, one soldier had knitted his sleeve into the Highland cow’s hair.

MacDonnell, who had already lifted his hands to clap and signal his soldiers, hesitated.

“You wouldn’t want to be down men, should you have to defend Glengavin from the Conquerors, sir,” Conor said, then reached down to the chessboard. He put his fingertip on MacDonnell’s king piece and slid it toward MacDonnell himself.

MacDonnell took a deep breath, one that seemed to make his already broad shoulders even broader. “A wise move, Conor — Briggan is indeed making you a good leader, even if you aren’t a good chess player. But what will my people think, if I allow you and your friends to break my law?”

“What if we did you some sort of favor in return for permission to break the law? A — a boon?”

Conor said.

“Such as?” MacDonnell asked, and Conor furrowed his eyebrows in thought. “I have no need for your money —”

“The hare,” Meilin said, stepping forward. “What if we find your spirit animal?”

“The hare for Devin Trunswick and Rumfuss?” MacDonnell’s eyes widened. “Deal. But I warn you — he’s not a friendly boar. Even if you find him, I doubt he will speak to you. You may arm yourselves from my stock, just in case.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Rollan said. He spun around. “Hey, can I borrow this?” he asked, diving toward the soldier knitted to the cow. He grabbed the soldier’s sword; when the soldier moved to stop him, the cow mooed irritably and shuffled away, dragging the man with him.

MacDonnell, who looked a bit overcome with the prospect of the hare returning to him, had a soldier lead them through the palace and down a wide staircase to the gardens. As they came into view, Rollan had to hide his surprise. When Rollan thought of gardens, he thought of little patches of grass with flowers. Maybe a fountain. Maybe even a tree, if it was a really fancy sort of garden. And what lay before him was exactly those things — except times a thousandfold.

The gardens stretched out toward the horizon. The section farthest away was a swath of gray almost the same color as the late morning sky. Somewhere was the wall that kept Rumfuss contained — but Rollan certainly couldn’t see it among the thick trees, climbing vines, and flower beds so ruffled and colorful they looked like ladies’ dresses cascading from their boxes.

“All right, what’s first?” Rollan asked. “The hare, Abeke, or Rumfuss?”

“I had a dream about the hare,” Conor said. “I think I know where he is. Finn, come with me, we’ll go after the hare. Meilin and Rollan, you guys go find Abeke.”



After Conor and Finn had hurried into the garden in search of the hare, leaving Rollan and Meilin on the steps, the two began searching the perimeter of the castle for Abeke.

Meilin was already clacking around with plans and possibilities. “There’s no place to keep Abeke locked up in a garden, is there? She has to be inside somewhere.”

“Surely not in their rooms — even Devin Trunswick isn’t that stupid,” Rollan said.

Kunaya wrapped herself around Meilin’s legs several times. Meilin looked down, clearly annoyed at the distraction. “Maybe a closet? Or another guest room? I wish every door in this castle wasn’t closed — Kunaya, stop rubbing on me!”

Kunaya bit Meilin on the leg, an action that made Meilin hiss and Rollan grin.

“You ridiculous *cat!*” Meilin snapped.

Suddenly Rollan felt a flash of intuition so strong that he knew Essix must be near. He said, “What if she’s not just a ridiculous cat? Kunaya was the last one to see Abeke.”

“Follow a cat?” Meilin said. “That is the stupidest idea you’ve ever had.”

Rollan said, “Oh, trust me, it is not. Let’s go.”

He started after Kunaya, and the little cat, looking pleased that they understood the game, bounded down the path ahead of them.

They rounded the corner of the castle. The carriage house came into view, a small but tidy building with a thatched roof. Kunaya shot into the dim interior, where carriages were lined up. The cat wove around the wheels, a blur of motion, ever faster. Meilin and Rollan had to hurry to keep up with her.

And then she stopped. With her tail crooked into a curl, she meowed smugly.

“Kunaya?” a voice called out, sounding just a little tearful.

Abeke! Rollan was stunned, even though the suggestion to follow the cat had been his. He vowed to make sure that Kunaya got a cat banquet thrown for her when this was all over.

He ran to one side of the carriage; Meilin ran to the other. Resting in the center of the carriage’s floorboard was a massive wooden trunk with a heavy lock.

Meilin leaned over the edge of the door. “Abeke! We’re here to save you!”

“Meilin?” Abeke’s startled voice came from inside the trunk. “Is that *you*?”

“And Rollan is here too,” Rollan said indignantly.

“I didn’t think anyone would find me!” Abeke cried, her voice muffled. “I managed to knot my bracelet onto Kunaya, but I ran out of cord before I could spell out where —”

“Great story,” said Rollan. “Tell us later. After we get you out.”

He grabbed ahold of the lock on the trunk and gave it a tug. Frowning at Meilin, he shook his head.

Meilin pursed her lips. “Perhaps there’s a spare key? Or — I bet Jhi could crush this entire thing if she sat on it!”

“Jhi is going to *sit on me*?” Abeke cried, voice panicked.

“Well, the trunk, not —”

“Jhi isn’t sitting on anyone,” Rollan said calmly. Clambering up on the carriage back, he grabbed for the canopy. It ripped easily, and with it came the thin pieces of metal that gave the canopy its shape. In a heartbeat, Rollan had pulled one from the fabric. He jammed it into the trunk’s lock and wiggled it around in a practiced way. Looking over his shoulder at Meilin, he grinned cheekily.

“What?” she said, flushing. “What are you smiling at me for? The lock —”

“What lock?” Rollan said. At that instant he twisted his makeshift pick a final time. The lock popped open and clattered to the ground.

Never has a poorly spent childhood paid off so well, Rollan thought with satisfaction.

Meilin laughed, a bright, honest sound that she swallowed as soon as she realized he had noticed it.

“Let me guess,” Meilin said. “Tutors?”

Rollan grinned.

In the carriage, the trunk’s lid flew open. Abeke and Uraza leaped out in motions so identical they looked like two of the same animal rather than one human and one leopard.

“How did you find me?” Abeke asked breathlessly.

“Kunaya’s not a spirit animal,” Meilin answered, looking down at the cat, “but she’s still a pretty great beast.” Meilin tugged the bracelet off Kunaya’s head and held it out to Abeke.

“Have Devin and Karmo found Rumfuss?” Abeke asked as she took the bracelet from Meilin and put it back on her wrist. “They’ve been looking for hours now!”

“I don’t think so,” Rollan said. “We can still find him before they do. Although I don’t have a clue where to look. What do boars like? Mud?”

Meilin and Abeke exchanged a look of exasperation.

“We could go ask MacDonnell?” Abeke suggested.

“By the time we find *him* and then look for Rumfuss —” Meilin began.

She was cut off by a sharp cry from the top of a nearby carriage. Essix was perched on a driver’s seat. When she caught Rollan’s surprised look, she cocked her head as if to say, *What? I showed up, didn’t I?*

“What is she trying to say, Rollan?” Meilin asked.

Rollan muttered, “Like I would know.”

But the falcon ruffled her feathers at him and cocked her head. He felt the familiar sensation of her intuition trickling into his own mind. *If it was like this all the time*, he thought, *things would be a lot easier.*

Meilin and Abeke were waiting for his verdict.

“Essix is the answer,” he said. “She can guide us from above. Come on!”

THE HARE

I HOPE THEY'VE FOUND ABEKE, CONOR THOUGHT AS HE AND Finn rushed down a path that snaked along the castle's east wall. Their search for the hare had consumed more time than Conor liked, and still they'd seen no sign of their friends. Around them, the garden darkened as morning faded into afternoon, and afternoon into late afternoon. Losing the talisman to Devin would be awful, but losing another one of their team after Tarik . . . it would be unthinkable. Briggan glanced over at Conor, as if he'd overheard the boy's thoughts.

"Convincing the hare to rejoin MacDonnell won't be easy," Finn said from behind them, startling Conor back to the moment. "Not after the way MacDonnell treated him."

"Remember Rollan's horse when we left Greenhaven?" Conor said, looking back at him. "He used to be a spirit animal. He was jealous of Rollan and Essix's bond. Maybe when the hare sees Briggan and me, he'll be jealous — jealous enough to want his bond with MacDonnell back."

"Maybe so," Finn said. "I know that *I* find your bond inspiring."

It was high praise coming from the quiet Greencloak, and Conor felt a surge of hope too. They pressed on. Then, suddenly, there it was: a curtain of wisteria.

This was in my dream, Conor thought.

He dove for it, pushing the cascade of purple flowers out of the way. Beside him, Briggan snorted and rubbed his nose against the ground, protesting the flowers' overpowering scent.

The three emerged in a small clearing of trees. There was a stone bench on one side; on the other, the castle's stone wall. The branches arched overhead, leaving only a tiny circle of the darkening sky visible.

Finn made an uncertain noise. “The horse’s partner died,” he reminded Conor. “He had no choice but to go on alone. The hare knows MacDonnell is still alive — what makes you think he misses the bond so much?”

Conor took a deep breath before stepping toward the castle wall. He extended a hand to a rosebush planted alongside the stone.

“Because,” he said. “Do you know what’s on the other side of this wall?”

“I don’t,” Finn admitted, voice cautious.

“It’s MacDonnell’s bedroom,” Conor said. Careful to avoid the thorns, he brushed the rosebush to one side.

With a soft whine, Briggan lay down. Finn sucked in a sharp breath. In the dark, two tiny, beetle-colored eyes shone, peering up at Conor. The hare had clearly been sleeping, curled up in a ball in the soft dirt. He looked surprised to see someone, much less someone so clearly looking for *him*.

“Hello,” Conor said gently. “I’m Conor, and this is Briggan, one of the Great Beasts. We’re, uh, hoping to convince you to return to Lord MacDonnell.”

The hare blinked. He did not look convinced. His ears sagged — not so much sleepy as hopeless.

Conor wished he’d worked out more to say. He had really just thought the invitation, combined with the image of Briggan and him together, would be enough.

Behind him, however, Finn exhaled before speaking. “I know what it is to lose your spirit animal. The pain I feel, I see in Lord MacDonnell’s eyes. I see in *your* eyes.”

The hare blinked again, his ears sagging further.

“Please,” Conor said. “Come with us. Come back to Glengavin. Give MacDonnell another chance. I know you miss him. You sleep beneath his bedroom window.”

“He wants you back,” Finn added. “He’s changed.”

This time, the hare did not blink. He sat still, his giant front legs locked in place. Only his nose moved, twitching with each breath. They were so close. Once they had convinced the hare to go back to MacDonnell, they could concentrate on Rumfuss. Time was running out. Conor finally reached toward the hare, palm open and promising, growing closer, closer to the animal —

The hare bolted, gone so fast into the underbrush that even Briggan couldn’t have outrun him. It would be impossible to find him in this huge, dark garden.

“Well,” Finn said, sounding defeated. “There goes that.”

Conor gritted his teeth. Why had he reached out? He should have been more patient, given the animal more time. He was a shepherd — he knew better than to rush an animal slow to trust.

Well, he reminded himself glumly. *You were a shepherd.*

Finn lifted a hand to touch a spot on his bicep — where his spirit animal, whatever it was, stayed dormant. “Perhaps sometimes a relationship is just too broken to fix.”

Briggan walked to Conor’s side and sat down, letting Conor run a hand over his fur for comfort. As soon as his hand came down on Briggan’s ruff, he felt something shift in his head. His mind cleared, and the feeling of hopelessness that was threatening to overpower him was washed away. He had to lead. He had to make a decision.

“We can at least stop Devin from getting the talisman, even if MacDonnell won’t let us take it for the Greencloaks,” he told Finn. “Let’s go find Rumpfuss.”



AFTER A FLYOVER OF THE GARDEN, ESSIX WAS ABLE TO GUIDE Rollan and the others toward the fruit orchards. The journey had taken the remainder of the day, but finally Essix had landed in the branches of a thick apple tree, and seemed to announce with a churr that they were close. Now, Meilin, Abeke, and Rollan hid in the shadow beside the apple tree, while Uraza peered across the orchard from the tree's branches itself. Abeke was impressed — perhaps Rollan and Essix really were working on their bond.

“My legs are cramping,” Rollan complained. “Let’s keep looking somewhere else.”

Abeke looked up at Uraza, whose lavender eyes met hers with disappointment. Leaving Kunaya sitting in the tree, Uraza slunk down to join the rest of them. Her movement caused a few apples to shake loose, one of which knocked Meilin on the head. She caught it on the bounce and held it up to the leopard accusingly.

“Sorry,” Abeke said for Uraza.

Meilin looked irritated for a moment, then tossed the apple into the darkness. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s go —”

Meilin didn’t finish her sentence, because Rollan had grabbed her arm in an uncharacteristically serious way. Essix, who was perched on his shoulder, stared in the same direction — the area where Meilin had thrown the apple. It was through grapevines and fruit trees, a part of the orchards that seemed more wild than the rest of the garden.

Under his breath, Rollan said, “It’s too dark and there’s all that stuff in the way. But I think it’s Rumpfuss.”

Meilin started in that direction. “Well, let’s go.”

“Wait,” Rollan said, snagging her cloak. “Do you really think we should just go blowing over there like a hurricane? He might run, or worse. Remember Arax?”

Abeke shuddered. The image of the gigantic ram bearing down on her would be with her for the rest of her life.

“If you were Rumfuss and crazy MacDonnell had locked you up in his garden, would you be excited about talking to humans?” Rollan continued.

“Well . . .” Abeke said as her gaze landed on Uraza. “Who better to approach one of the Great Beasts than fellow Great Beasts? Uraza, could you go see Rumfuss?”

Uraza’s ears tilted forward and she sat down, tail twitching behind her. Rollan gave Essix a nervous look, but the falcon made a soft clicking sound and jumped to the nearest branch. Meilin held out her arm and Jhi tumbled out, crunching loudly onto the ground. Everyone cringed as Rollan peered back through the trees to make certain the noise hadn’t sent Rumfuss running.

“All right,” Rollan said. “Good luck, guys.”

Uraza was the first to go, letting her tail swing playfully in Abeke’s face as she walked off. She was every bit as silent on the ground as Essix was in the air. Jhi took a step forward —

“Maybe wait a moment?” Meilin said, putting an arm in front of the panda. The panda obliged, giving Uraza and Essix time to reach Rumfuss before she started off. Jhi rumbled off into the trees, crushing leaves and sticks under her heavy paws. When Abeke could no longer see the bright white bits of Jhi’s fur, she worriedly rubbed the spot on her arm where Uraza usually waited in her dormant state.

A growl came from the trees, then a falcon’s cry. There was then a huge, roaring sort of noise, almost human in its expressiveness — the boar. None of the noises were sounds of alarm, but it still made Abeke’s eyes widen.

Funny, she thought. A few months ago I’d never even met Uraza. Now I’m nervous when I lose sight of her.

“Oh!” Meilin said, reaching forward and touching her temple. “We . . . we can go speak to Rumfuss now.”

“Jhi told you that?” Rollan asked, sounding impressed.

Meilin shrugged. “Not told, exactly. But I felt calmness. Safety.”

They crept through the trees — despite Meilin’s spirit animal, she was able to go rather quietly, though it was Abeke who truly moved like the leopard without even trying. Suddenly they broke through the darkened area into a copse of peach trees. Light now poured down from the heavy moon, so Abeke could see Rumfuss clearly. Perhaps *too* clearly.

Abeke thought Arax the Ram was rather frightening, but he was nothing compared to Rumfuss. The boar was more than twice her height and had narrow, dark eyes. His hide looked more like armor than skin, and the hair that jutted out from either cheek looked like it would cut her hand if she touched it. Most dangerous looking, however, were the two thick tusks on either side of his snout. They gleamed yellow-white and looked like the sharp corners of two glowing stars. Several huge mounds of chewed apples, each as tall as Abeke, surrounded him on all sides.

Rumfuss grunted, stamped at the ground, and then he spoke with a resonant voice that seemed to boom from both inside and outside Abeke. “You . . . want?”

His words were filled with the hesitation of someone who does not speak a language fluently. Abeke thought it had probably been a long time since he’d spoken to any humans.

“Rumfuss,” she said politely. “We seek your talisman — the Iron Boar. We need it to defeat the Devourer.”

“Talisman?” Rumfuss grunted warily. He flicked his tail back and forth, the bundle of hairs on the end whishing at his legs. “Why . . . give it to you?”

“The Conquerors will come for it otherwise,” Meilin spoke up. “They’ve already taken my country, Zhong. And they’ve taken over Trunswick. *And* two Conqueror recruits are here, in this garden, looking for you — for the talisman.”

“Can . . . handle . . . recruits,” Rumfuss said. Abeke didn’t doubt that he’d be a match for Devin and Karmo, even with their powerful spirit animals.

“*We* still need the talisman, though,” Abeke pleaded. “We can’t handle the Conquerors on our own.”

“In return?” Rumfuss grunted.

“Um . . .” Abeke frowned. She looked to Meilin, who was equally lost.

“Freedom,” Rollan said. They turned to look at him. He was leaning against one of the peach tree’s branches, arms slung across it casually. He lifted his eyebrows at the girls. “That’s what anyone who’s in a cage wants most, no matter how big the cage is. Right, Rumfuss?”

The boar stamped the ground and nodded his head; Rollan smiled a bit in understanding.

“Wall,” Rumfuss said, turning his head and jutting his snout toward the edge of the peach trees. There was indeed an immense stone wall, which rose up high above even the Great Beast’s head. With all its jutting stones, it would have been nothing for an animal like Uraza to escape, but for a creature more lumbering, even one as huge as Rumfuss, it might as well have been a thousand feet tall.

“Not so fast,” a voice jolted through the dark. A voice Abeke knew. A voice she knew too well.

They whirled around. Uraza hunched and hissed, showing her impressive teeth. Rumfuss stamped the ground and gave a throaty, rolling growl. Even Jhi hunched forward and flexed her muscles.

“What a reception,” Devin said, grinning like this was all a fantastic game. “Abeke! I see you managed to escape. My own fault — I always underestimate how wily vermin can be when they’re cornered.” Karmo, standing beside Devin, looked sour at the joke, though Devin snickered hard at his own genius.

“Rumfuss, we’re going to need that talisman,” Devin continued. He whistled sharply; the wildcat appeared at his side. Karmo’s hammerkop flapped out from the trees, thick bill open and menacing.

Rumfuss looked unimpressed — and Abeke couldn’t blame him. The three of them, their spirit animals, and Rumfuss the Great Beast against Devin and Karmo? They could handle this.

But then Devin grinned even wider, and whistled again. Now the trees were alive with footsteps, footsteps of all sizes, skittering sounds, crunching sounds, the sounds of hooves and paws and human feet on the ground. Conquerors — a dozen or more, and all with spirit animals — poured from the foliage. There was a man with an iguana around his shoulders, and another with a meerkat crouched at his feet. There was a giraffe, a lemur, and a bobcat, each paired with a human who looked armed and ready for combat.

Devin had snuck Conquerors into Glengavin.

“Well, Rumfuss? The Iron Boar Talisman?” Devin said, holding out his hand.

Rumfuss studied Devin for a moment, so long a moment that Abeke began to worry he was going to give in. But then the boar lowered his head. He huffed, nostrils flaring, and his hackles lifted.

Then he charged.

BATTLE

“HEAR THE OTHERS! THEY’RE UP AHEAD!” CONOR SHOUTED back to Finn. Briggan was in the lead and howled as he blasted through the orchard, leaping over grapevines and dodging tree trunks. Conor wasn’t exactly sure who *they* were just yet — but he knew they were either *in* trouble or they *were* trouble. Animal sounds rose up like a storm in the night — roars, chirps, growls, snarls, hoots, and cries. Overhead, a falcon shrieked.

“That’s Essix!” Finn shouted.

Conor’s heart thrummed frantically. Briggan howled again, guiding them through the vines, until . . .

Conor’s pounding heart stopped instead.

Conquerors. Spirit animals. A boar as large as a carriage — that *had* to be Rumfuss. And in the middle of it all, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan. Abeke and Uraza worked as a team, bounding off trees and tackling their opponents. Uraza knocked them down, with Abeke moving quickly behind her to fling the smaller spirit animals away and deliver a few well-placed kicks to her downed opponents’ ribs. Jhi was safely in passive state, a tattoo on the same arm Meilin used to box a Conqueror in the nose. Rollan dove under arms and ducked through legs like someone with a bit of practice at evading authority.

“Conor!” Meilin cried desperately, somehow seeing him between Conquerors. Saying his name took Meilin’s concentration away for a heartbeat too long — a macaw swooped down and blinded her with scarlet feathers and claws. It gave a nearby enemy enough time to grab her by the leg and pull her down.

“Briggan!” Conor shouted to the wolf, who darted into the crowd and heaved the Conqueror off Meilin. Another one, however, took his place in an instant — there were too many. Far too many.

A bobcat leaped for Conor’s face; he threw his staff into the air just in time to knock it away. He bashed it a second time in the head, rendering it unconscious, then ran forward, staff held horizontal so that it crashed into the backs of a few unsuspecting Conquerors. A baboon grabbed hold of his arm, yanking him down so hard Conor thought he might have dislocated his shoulder. Wincing through the pain, Conor whirled around and punched it squarely in the face. Rollan was suddenly there, offering him a hand up, but he’d no sooner found his feet than he realized a group of Conquerors were surrounding the two of them.

“Any ideas?” Rollan said. Essix swooped down, clawing at the eyes of a few Conquerors, but it wasn’t enough to stop the horde. Briggan was still helping Meilin; Uraza and Abeke were being forced farther and farther into the orchard. Conor gripped his staff; Rollan, his sword.

Suddenly a pile of men were lifted into the air with a chorus of screams — Rumfuss! The boar smashed through them, sending fur and bodies flying. Conor wanted to pause and marvel at his size and strength, but there was no time. He spun forward, bringing the staff down hard on a nearby Conqueror’s head.

Conor turned to see who needed help; there were still so many enemies, at least another half dozen, and mostly the ones with the sizable spirit animals. Meilin leaped from a branch and, midair, released Jhi from passive form. The panda slammed to the ground, butt-first, crushing a woman beneath her, and then in a flash was back to being a tattoo on Meilin’s arm. Finn was by her, fending off a man with a giraffe who used its muscled neck like a battering ram —

Conor suddenly felt the unmistakable pain of teeth slicing into his shoulder. Devin’s black wildcat had leaped on him from behind. Its claws and teeth were tearing into Conor’s skin. He couldn’t stop himself from screaming in pain, and turned in a wide circle, flinging the beast off. Conor grabbed his shoulder, and his hand came away sticky with blood.

“Not so great now, are you?” Devin hissed at him, and stalked forward. He tilted his head toward the wildcat, who raced back to him and threaded herself around his legs. Devin started forward; Conor lifted his staff but winced. He couldn’t hold its weight with his injuries.

“You thought you were so special, didn’t you, Conor? You thought you were better than me. You thought Briggan made you greater. Briggan’s just a shadow of the Great Beast he used to be. Elda, however, is still a legend.”

Conor backed up; strong hands grabbed his shoulders — a Conqueror. The man dug his fingers into Conor’s fresh wound until he shrieked in pain. *Briggan, I need you*, he thought desperately.

Then he saw the wolf. Briggan was being held down by several Conquerors, one of whom kicked him sharply in the stomach. Briggan yelped loudly, and Conor could feel the noise in his skull.

Seeing this, Devin snorted. “Great Beast? Sure.” He turned back to Conor. “Elda. Take him down.”

Conor closed his eyes, but then immediately opened them again — he was scared, but he wasn’t going to face his death with his eyes shut. Elda yowled, deep, sharp, and rumbling, and sprang forward.

Something else grabbed the wildcat in midair, crushing her to the ground. Something sleek and black, almost like a shadow rather than an animal. It bounded away quickly. Elda didn’t get up, but her chest continued to rise and fall weakly. Devin’s eyes widened and he rushed to her side. With a flash, she disappeared into a tattoo on his arm. The Conqueror holding Conor’s shoulders released him, drawing a knife to fight off whatever this new creature was. But the animal was too fast — it pounced on the man, slashing his neck with what must be massive teeth. Then it shot off toward Meilin and Finn.

Devin was roaring angrily, shouting at the others. Karmo, who had been fighting Abeke, turned to look — just long enough for Rollan to tackle him to the ground and then hold him at swordpoint. Abeke dove for the hammerkop, which narrowly avoided her grasp and flapped for the trees. Conor ran for Briggan and shoved his staff deep into the stomach of the man kicking *his* wolf. It gave Briggan just enough time to bound to his feet and leap back into action.

The Conquerors were realizing how dangerously low their numbers had fallen — three left, no, two, since Rumfuss had just tossed one over the wall.

The dark shape, still moving too fast for Conor to see clearly, pounced on another man. Finn tossed his blade to Meilin, who held it aloft toward the final Conqueror. The man looked at her, then at the others. He then turned and fled.

“Coward!” Devin screamed. “Come back and fight!”

It was not very wise for Devin to draw attention to himself — Uraza heard him. She bounded across the orchard and pounced, slamming Devin into the ground with her front paws. She bared her teeth at the boy, flexing her claws out so that they pricked Devin’s shoulders.

“Is everyone all right?” Conor finally asked, panting.

“I’m fine,” Abeke said. “Just hold him there, Uraza —”

“Get your stupid cat off me!” Devin barked.

Abeke shook her head. “Never mind, Uraza. You can eat him.”

This shut Devin up, at least for a few moments, while the others called out. Meilin had a bad cut on her arm, and maybe some broken toes. Essix was missing more than a few tail feathers, and it was

making her fly all wobbly. Rollan had a black eye, though Karmo, lying on the ground with his palms up in surrender, had two.

They'd survived. Not only survived . . . they'd won. Conor could scarcely believe it.

And Finn — where was he?

“Finn?” Conor called out. “Where'd he go?”

“He was just here!” Meilin said, looking around in a panic.

“I'm fine,” Finn said. His voice was hushed and thick with awe. It took them a few moments to work out where it was coming from. When they did, their jaws dropped in unison.

“Finn!” Abeke finally said. “It's you!”

Finn smiled, really smiled, his face bright and open. Conor couldn't remember him ever smiling before. The Greencloak lowered his arm and ran it along the back of a spirit animal — *his* spirit animal — who stood by his feet. He touched the creature with nervous, shaking hands, like he was very afraid this was just a dream.

“Why didn't you say anything?” Meilin asked wonderously.

“I thought he was gone,” Finn said. “I thought he didn't want me anymore.” His spirit animal looked up at him, then forced his head into Finn's hand, nuzzling at him. He was beautiful — ink black, with even blacker spots that glowed in the moonlight.

A black wildcat.

BLACK WILDCAT

FINN WAS THE BOY FROM THE NORTH, THE LEGEND DEVIN only pretended to be. Abeke laughed loudly in shock, Meilin stared, and Rollan scoffed and shook his head like he still didn't quite believe it. Even Rumfuss looked impressed.

"The bond . . . never lost," Rumfuss said, so wisely that it was hard to think less of him when he dropped his head and ate a mostly rotten apple from the ground.

"Rumfuss," Conor said. The boar looked up, and Conor dropped his head with respect. "Thank you for fighting with us."

"Thank you," Rumfuss said roughly, "for . . . fighting for me." The boar paused for a moment, then also dropped his head to the ground. At first Conor presumed it was to eat another piece of fallen fruit. Instead, the boar dug his massive tusk into the dirt of the nearest tree. It only took him a few moments to emerge with something hanging from it.

"Is that —" Abeke began.

"The talisman?" Conor finished.

"Here," Rumfuss said, stretching his neck out. Conor reached forward and took the pendant from the boar's shining tusk, his muscles tensing at the animal's smoky breath on his forearm. The talisman — the Iron Boar — was very heavy, and a deep rust color similar to Rumfuss's hide. It was shaped like a boar, of course, and while Conor couldn't be certain, he suspected the miniature boar's tusks were made from bits of Rumfuss's full-sized ones. They were too perfect not to be.

"Thank you," Conor said. "Thank you so much." He slipped the talisman around his neck and turned to the others. Karmo rose, still at Rollan's swordpoint. Uraza reluctantly got off Devin, though Meilin was quick to brandish her own dagger right under his chin.

“Wait,” Rollan said. “Rumfuss. We promised to free him for the talisman.”

“I will . . . be fine,” Rumfuss snorted, but Rollan shook his head.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” he said. He turned to Rumfuss. “Come with us. We’ll tell MacDonnell how you fought off Conquerors on his grounds. He’ll owe you a favor.”

“Hopefully that favor will work for the rest of us too, because we don’t have the hare,” Conor said.

“Hare?” Rumfuss asked.

“MacDonnell’s lost spirit animal. He ran off before Finn and I could convince him to return. What do you think MacDonnell will care about more — that we didn’t hold up our end of the bargain, or that we stopped his castle from being invaded?”

No one answered. It was hard to tell with someone like MacDonnell. Conor tucked the talisman under his shirt. With a resigned sigh, he led the others back through the orchard groves, toward the castle. The trek back through the massive gardens took nearly as long as it had to find the boar. Rumfuss followed, uprooting entire trees when they got in his way rather than walking around them. The two prisoners sulked silently the whole way — or rather, silently until either Rollan or Meilin poked them a bit too hard with the tips of their blades.

They arrived back at the garden steps to see most of the castle staff waiting for them. The night sky was already brightening. Rumfuss had elected to wait within the boundary of the tree line.

MacDonnell and his children stood ahead of the others.

“Kindly tell me, what sounded like a *war* going on in my garden?” MacDonnell barked at them, motioning toward the orchards.

“It was a war. Well, a battle, I guess. But it sure felt like a war,” Rollan said, and Karmo made a sound of agreement.

“Lord MacDonnell,” Finn said. “Devin and Karmo allowed other Conquerors onto your grounds to help them capture Rumfuss the Boar and take his talisman.”

MacDonnell’s eyes widened, and a vein on his forehead began to pulsate. Seeing this, his children stepped away. “You mean to tell me, these two not only insulted my hospitality . . . they *invaded* my home?”

“We didn’t invade —”

“Silence!” MacDonnell roared. “Guards! Relieve me of the burden of Devin Trunswick’s presence. Lock up him and his companion immediately. And force Devin to call his spirit animal into its passive state.”

“It is in its passive state, sir,” Conor said shyly. “*This* wildcat belongs to Finn.”

Now all attention shot to Finn, and a ripple of shock and awe raced through the crowd. Even MacDonnell's lips parted in wonder as Finn stepped forward, his wildcat, Donn, moving regally beside him. Donn made Elda look like a kitten. He was all muscle, with eyes as bright and yellow as the sun reflected off water. His black fur was dark velvet.

"The wildcat? The one from the legends? That means . . . you . . ." MacDonnell said, lifting his eyes to Finn. Suddenly MacDonnell was laughing, voice booming. "The true legend! In my home! I knew it couldn't be that snub-nosed Trunswick child!"

Finn bowed a bit, though he seemed rather bashful of the attention. Conor could relate. As the tittering and excitement died down, Finn cleared his throat. "My lord, we did not stop the Conquerors on our own. We were assisted by none other than Rumfuss, the Great Beast."

At this, Rumfuss, who had been mostly lurking in the shadows of the garden, stepped ever so slightly into the dwindling moonlight. The sheer size of him was obvious, even from this glimpse. The boar's eyes landed hard upon Lord MacDonnell. A hush fell over the assembled crowd; a few people went indoors, wary of Rumfuss's ferocity. Conor found himself wondering for the first time just how the Great Beast had ended up within these walls. A story for another time, perhaps.

"It would be very honorable, sir," Conor added, "for you to release him from captivity, in return for his heroics."

MacDonnell paused. He puffed up his shoulders a bit, and somehow managed to look nearly as large as Rumfuss. "The deal, if I recall, was my hare for Rumfuss and his talisman. I cannot allow lawbreakers to simply suggest new laws for their own convenience."

"Oh, come on!" Rollan snapped. "You'd be overrun with Conquerors right now!"

"My castle, my law!" MacDonnell barked, and there was a buzz of agreement among the crowd, though Conor suspected this was merely because no one wanted to disagree with a man like MacDonnell. He shook his head, furious with himself for not convincing the hare sooner.

Behind him, Rumfuss made a deep sound in his throat, one that was loud but strangely gentle, almost like a cat purring. Rumfuss inclined his large head, indicating over his shoulder with a perfect tusk, then stamped a foot on the ground softly.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd. MacDonnell's face paled and, even from afar, Conor could see his lower lip was trembling.

It was the hare. It hopped from behind Rumfuss slowly, cautiously. Rumfuss looked down at the hare, who peered back up at him. They were speaking, though whatever they were saying was beyond any of the humans present. The hare now turned and looked up at MacDonnell, who sank to his knees in one swift motion. The sight of the great Lord MacDonnell in such a position sent a chorus of gasps from the assembled servants.

Rumfuss looked up at MacDonnell. “Say . . . sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” MacDonnell said immediately. “I’m so very sorry.”

“Say . . . never again.”

“Never again!” MacDonnell said, voice pleading.

“Say . . . you want.”

“What?”

“I think the hare wants to know you want him,” Meilin said. She wore a pained expression that Conor couldn’t quite figure out. “That you are satisfied with him.”

“I do! I am!” MacDonnell bellowed. With this, the hare sprang forward. MacDonnell’s face spread into a wide, teary grin as the hare leaped into the air and, with a flash, disappeared — only to reappear as a tattoo on the man’s forearm. MacDonnell rose, tears falling freely, and placed a hand over the hare tattoo, like he was afraid it would melt away.

“You’re free!” he called out to Rumfuss. “Free! I should never have locked you up. You have my gratitude and my apologies, Rumfuss. I beg you to forgive me.”

Rumfuss didn’t seem quite ready for forgiveness, but he patiently followed the guards around the edge of the castle. Then, when the gates had finally opened, he was patient no more. There was a sound that seemed to shake the entire castle, and suddenly the only Great Beasts left in the garden were the ones that had come with them.



WHILE MACDONNELL WOULD HAVE BEEN HAPPY TO HOUSE the Greencloaks as esteemed guests for another night, Finn had insisted time was of the essence. Though Rollan loudly protested — the boy had only slept a single night in that amazing bed — their group set off that very morning. Understandably, they bypassed Trunswick entirely, shaving several days off the return trip to Lady Evelyn's. There they found a rather embarrassed Tarik, much improved from his previous condition. He was tired, but healthy enough to travel with them the relatively short way back to Greenhaven Castle.

Finn, however, would not be going with them. After a hushed and intense conversation, Tarik returned to the group and announced that he would ask Olvan's permission for Finn to remain at Glengavin. Finn would act as a much-needed emissary for the Greencloaks in the North. He was, after all, supposed to be their long-awaited hero. It took a little convincing that the group wouldn't need his protection on the way back — Tarik was clearly not yet at full strength — but Rollan's enthusiastic and animated retelling of the battle in the apple orchard reminded the older Greencloaks that the Four Fallen had learned a lot on this trip.

Still, they were glad that the remaining leg of the journey was so short, with just a single night's stop between them and home. Soon they would be back in Greenhaven, enjoying a well-earned moment of peace and safety.

They had done it, really done it. The second talisman was in Greencloak hands.



That night, as Conor stood watch over the others, he reveled in the wide, starry peace of the Euran pasture for what might be the last time in a long, long while.

And just for a moment, he let his guard down.

A cloaked figure loomed out of the darkness. Immediately Conor scrambled to his feet, ready to cry out for the others. As he reached for a weapon, however, a low, familiar voice, said, “Conor, it’s me.”

Dawson. Conor blinked at Devin’s little brother. He kept his voice quiet, so that he wouldn’t wake the others. “Why are you here? Are you alone?”

Dawson pushed back his hood, revealing shiny, high cheeks and bright eyes. He nodded. “I have a letter for you.”

Conor marveled that the younger boy had tracked them down just to deliver a letter, but he nodded. Bashfully, he admitted, “You know I won’t be able to read it.”

“I’ll read it,” whispered Dawson, taking the weathered sheet from his cloak with a sad expression. “But just . . . I’m sorry, Conor. It’s from my father.” He took a deep breath.

Conor, son of Fenray,

I know that we last met under unpleasant terms, and you will not want to listen to what I have to say. However, I would like you to imagine the starving faces of your family as Dawson reads you this letter. Then you should imagine all the worse things than starvation that can befall a woman charged with betraying her lord to his enemy — even if this enemy is her own son. I have a bargain for you. Give the Iron Boar to Dawson. As soon as it is in my hands, I will forgive your family’s debt and your mother will go free. They will own the land they work, and all the sheep they tend. They will be freemen, no longer my serfs. All you have to do is give Dawson the talisman. And if you do not? I will hold them to every last copper that they owe me, and I promise you, they will starve this winter, and the fate of your mother will be far crueller. Rest assured this is the last you will hear from me either way. Devin has become involved in something that Trunswick can no longer afford to support openly, lest we collapse upon ourselves. Zerif tells me that if the Conquerors may have their talisman, then I may have my family back. And so you will have yours.

The decision is yours.

With regards, The Earl of Trunswick.

Dawson folded the letter and put it back in his cloak. He at least had the grace to look horrified.

Conor's hands shook as he imagined his mother's thin face on the night they'd escaped from Trunswick. How proud she'd been of him! *Follow your heart!*

He glanced at the others. They slept soundly, trusting him to watch them on their way back to Greenhaven. They trusted him with this treasure of Rumfuss. But his family had trusted him to help keep them alive too, when they'd sent him to Trunswick to be Devin's servant. No matter how hateful he had found that position.

What was the right decision? Once the Greencloaks were victorious, surely his family would be free. But it would be too late then.

Conor was glad that Briggan was in passive form. He didn't want to see the wolf's expression as he crept to his saddlebag and removed the Iron Boar.

"I expect your father to keep his word," he whispered to Dawson. He gave the talisman to the boy. Dawson nodded. "I'll make sure he does, Conor."

Tucking the Iron Boar into his cloak, Dawson ran into the night. The sound of his footfalls woke Meilin's horse, and Meilin sat up with a start.

"Conor, is someone there?" she asked. Her voice made the others stir as well.

When Conor, shattered with guilt, didn't answer, her eyes darted from his saddlebag, the flap hanging open, revealing the empty inside, to the place in the woods he still stared after.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What happened?"

Conor hung his head. "I'm sorry."

CONSEQUENCES

THE NIGHT WAS DARK AND FULL OF ANIMALS.

Meilin lay in her bed, eyes wide open. Her mind was full of the gardens of Zhong, her father's wise face, and the Conquerors marching over the places she'd loved.

The four kids were finally back in Greenhaven. It had been a few days since they'd returned, and Meilin's mind had been troubled for each of them. Their journey seemed to have been for nothing; Conor had handed over the precious talisman to the enemy. For his family! Hadn't she wanted to go to Zhong for her family when she'd had the chance? Hadn't he been the first to tell her to stay with them?

Far off, down the hall, someone's spirit animal made a drowsy night noise. Meilin was far away from sleep.

Since they'd returned, the fortress had been abuzz with the changes happening all over Erdas. People were taking sides. For the Greencloaks and the Fallen. For the Conquerors and Zerif's new false heroes. Rumors were on everyone's lips: rumors of an advancing army, and of the strange promise the army had — a potion, stronger than the Nectar of Ninani, which could force the spirit animal bond for anyone who drank it: the Bile.

There was no more time for wasted missions.

"Jhi," Meilin whispered. The panda had been drowsing in the corner of the room, but when she heard her name, she lifted her chin. Her eyes were sympathetic. "Help me."

This time, when Meilin closed her eyes, searching for answers, the orbs around her were like droplets of water, brilliant, fragile, trembling. They spilled from her eyes and down her cheeks. Here were her choices: Stay. Go.

One was both wise and logical.

Stay. Fight alongside the Greencloaks: Build an army to fight this new threat.

Go. Be an army of one: Find her father before it was too late. It was neither wise nor logical. Jhi's intuition recommended against it.

But it was the choice Meilin was going to make.

She got out of bed and packed, silent and swift. The panda hesitated when Meilin held out her arm. She was offended, perhaps. After all, she'd offered her advice and Meilin wasn't taking it. Or maybe she was concerned. She'd never refused the passive state before. With a frown, Meilin focused on the request. With a whimper, Jhi vanished in a searing flash, reappearing on Meilin's skin, barely visible in the dark night.

Meilin stopped only to pick up a map from the map room and a bag of food from the kitchen.

Then she let herself out of the castle. She was going back to Zhong.

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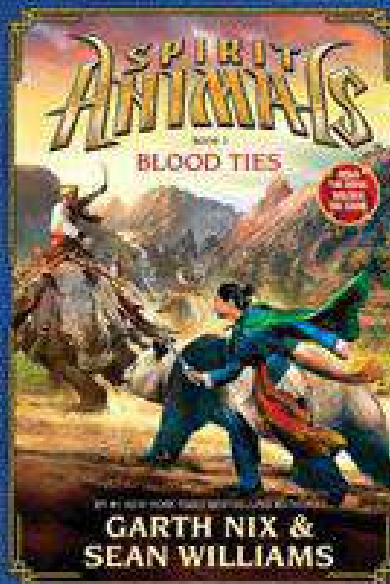
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1

THE GREAT BAMBOO MAZE

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It had seemed like such a good idea when she first thought of reaching Zhong through the Maze. The bamboo forest had been specially grown as a defense where the Wall did not run, and only selected messengers and senior officials knew the secret ways through the miles and miles of fifty-foot-high bamboo. Meilin's father, General Teng, knew the secrets, of course, and long ago he had told Meilin how to get through from the Northern Entrance.

"Always turn left the first ten times," whispered Meilin to herself. "Then ten turns always right, then left, right, left, left, left, left, right, right, right."

But she had followed those instructions and had *not* found herself on the other side of the Maze. Even worse, she had counted on getting through in the single day it was supposed to take. The leather bottle of water she had filled from a stream at the entrance and two rice cakes should have been easily enough to sustain her.

Now it was the morning of the third day. Her water bottle was empty and the rice cakes were distant memories. This, coming at the end of a week's long trek by boat and caravan across Eura, often smuggled away in dusty crates and rat-infested holds, left her feeling frustrated at her failure, as well as hungry and thirsty. Only the distant hope that her father might still be alive, and that she might somehow live long enough to find him, kept her from giving up.

Angrily, Meilin struck the stem of the nearest bamboo with her quarterstaff, the blow so powerful that it cracked the four-inch-thick bole. The bamboo fell among its fellows, but there were so many it might never have been there in the first place. There was nothing but impossibly tall bamboo all around, the narrow path, the sun high above.

For the first time, Meilin thought she might actually die in the Maze. The daughter of General Teng, to die of thirst in a bamboo forest! It was unbearable!

An itch on her forearm diverted Meilin's thoughts. She slid up her sleeve and looked at the tattoo of a sleepy panda. She had kept her spirit animal, Jhi, in her dormant state in the Great Bamboo Maze, fearing the panda would hold her back. Now that was the least of Meilin's concerns.

"Come on, then!" ordered Meilin. "Come out and do something useful. Maybe you could *eat* a way through the bamboo for me!"

There was a flash of light and sudden movement. A furry weight pressed into her side as Jhi appeared and leaned against her, pushing her against the closest stand of bamboo, making it shake.

"Hey, watch it," protested Meilin. She felt something touch her face, and thinking it an insect, brushed it aside, only to feel more of whatever it was land on her hand. She looked up and saw delicate white flowers falling from the tips of the bamboo high above, like tiny warm snowflakes.

Bamboo flowers.

Meilin had never seen bamboo flowers before. She knew the plants only flowered once every fifty or sixty or even a hundred years, and then they died. All the bamboo plants, all at once.

"The Maze is dying," she whispered, staring up at the tops of the bamboo. Every stand of bamboo she could see was flowering. In a week or two, the bamboo would begin to dry out, crack, and fall. Before that, the floor of the forest would be covered in flowers, attracting great hordes of rats and other animals to this once-in-a-century feast.

With the Maze gone, yet more of Zhong would be completely unprotected. The Conquerors had overrun her poor country through the Wall, and now even its lesser defenses were being torn away. Perhaps even this flowering had been caused by the Devourer somehow.

Jhi sat down heavily and reached up to drag Meilin down next to her with one big paw.

"I can't sit down!" protested Meilin. "I have to find a way out!"

She pushed the panda's paw aside and took a few steps along the left-hand path. Then she hesitated, turned, and took a few steps along the right-hand path. Jhi made a kind of snuffling noise.

"Are you laughing?" demanded Meilin. "This is very serious! I'm lost. I have no food or water. I could die here!"

Jhi patted the ground next to her. It was a very human gesture, and it reminded Meilin of her father, when he wanted her to sit next to him and receive some wisdom. What she wouldn't have given to see

him now.

“I haven’t got time to sit down!” she rasped. “Come on!”

It really didn’t matter *what* path she took now, Meilin thought. She was totally lost. What was important now was speed. She had to get out of the Maze before she died of starvation and thirst.

She set off at a loping run, sure that this time there would be an opening in the tight ranks of bamboo, that the path would lead to a clearing, that she would be in the open lands of Zhong.

Jhi made another noise behind her, but Meilin ignored it. Once again, her spirit animal was proving useless. If only she had Essix! The falcon could fly up and spot the way out.

“You would think a panda might be of *some* use in a bamboo forest!” muttered Meilin. She ran on another fifty yards, and came to yet another intersection of paths. She could go left, right, or straight ahead. They all looked exactly the same: long narrow tracks between great stands of bamboo.

Meilin stopped and looked back. Jhi was following her slowly but steadfastly. As the girl looked, the panda reached up and pulled down a bamboo stem, effortlessly bending it until it broke. The topmost stems came down near the path just behind the girl, showering her once again with flowers. Jhi sauntered along and began to eat, stuffing huge pawfuls of bamboo stems, leaves, and flowers into her mouth.

Meilin felt her own hunger, a pain in her middle that was difficult to ignore. Her mouth would have watered, but it was too dry. She had tried eating the bamboo on the second day, and it had caused stomach cramps that only made her feel hungrier. It was too dry, and there were no soft, new shoots that would have been easier to digest.

“There has to be a way out,” she whispered. She looked wildly at the different paths. There really was no difference between them. She had gone right last time. Now she would go left, Meilin thought. Left and then right at the next intersection, and so on. Zigzagging. That would work. She would get *somewhere* that way.

“Come on,” she said to Jhi.

This time Meilin didn’t run. She just didn’t have the energy anymore. But she walked fast, ignoring her hunger pains and rasping throat, the heat and the humidity.

“I *will* find a way out,” she whispered. “I *will* get to Zhong. I *will* fight the Devourer and our enemies.”

But against that, there was a small voice in her head that whispered a hopeless, constantly repeating thought.

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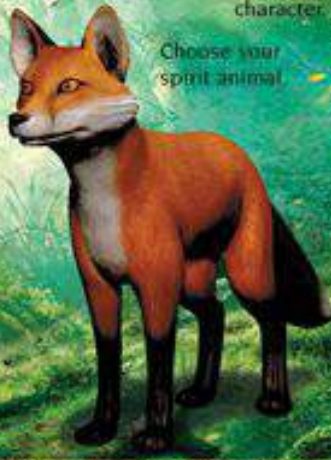
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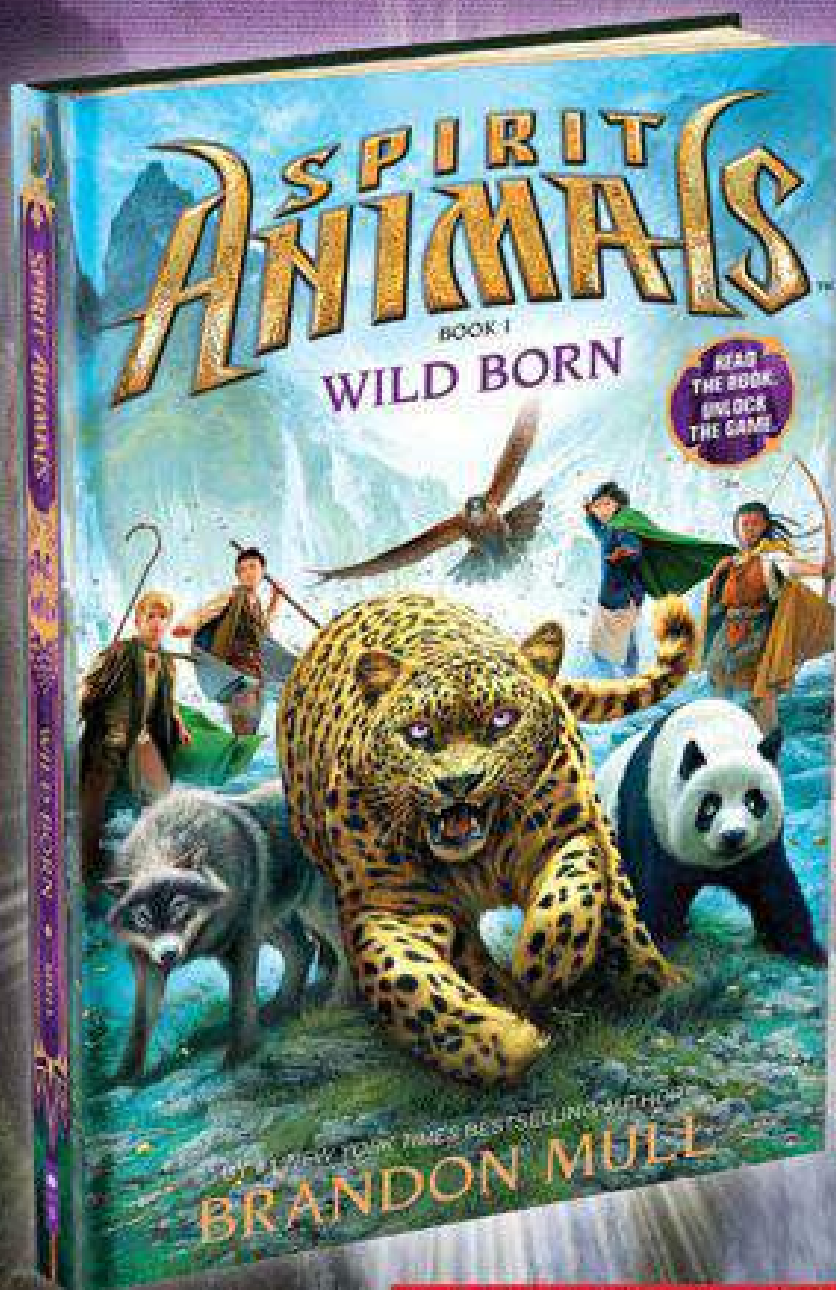
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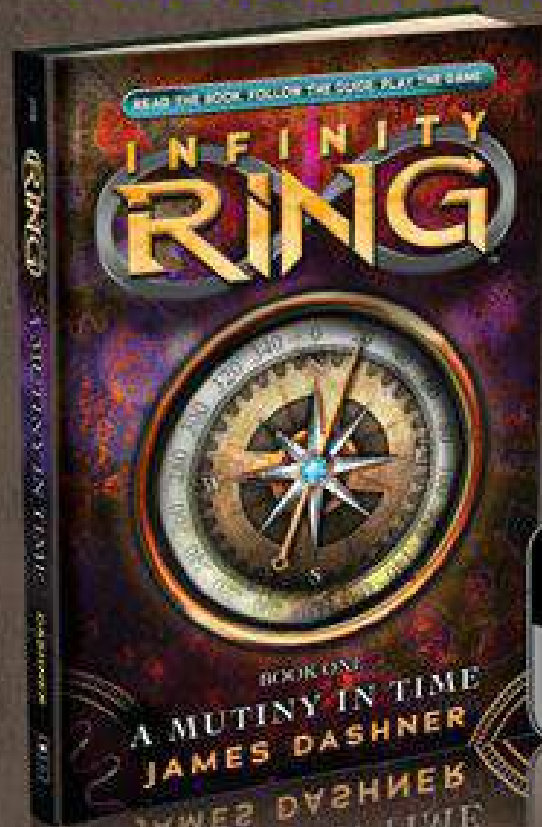
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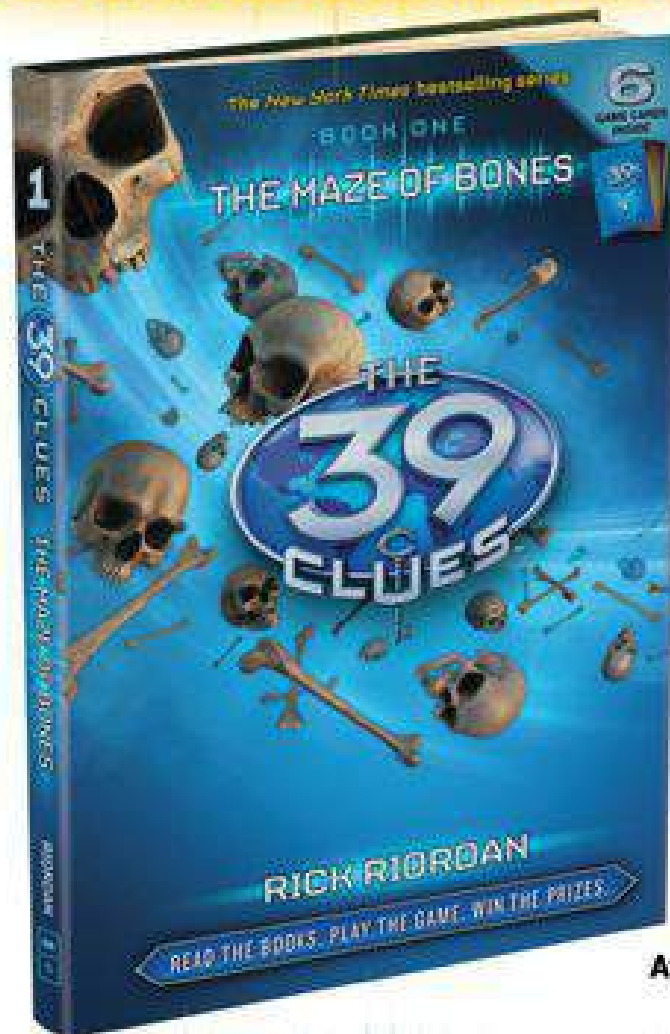
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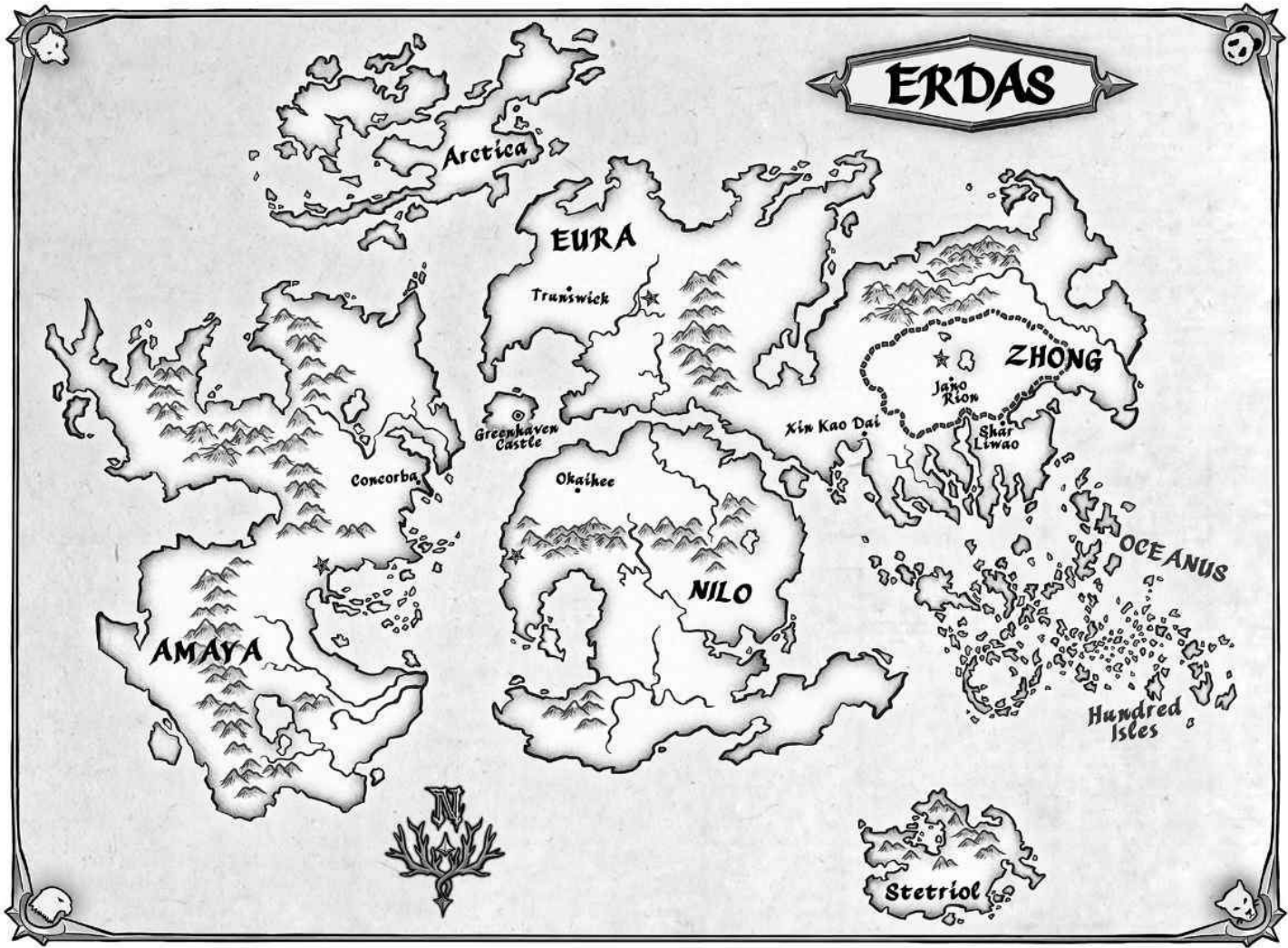
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Xin Kao Dai

OCEANUS

Hundred
Isles

Stetriol

For all the furred, feathered, finned, and scaled friends who have enriched my life.

— G.N.

*For Skipper and Jumpy, the frogs who came to visit, their owner Amelia, and her twin brother,
Orlando.*

— S.W.



Panda Emblem

Greencloak Letter

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Map of Erdas

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An itch on her forearm diverted Meilin's thoughts. She slid up her sleeve and looked at the tattoo of a sleepy panda. She had kept her spirit animal, Jhi, in her dormant state in the Great Bamboo Maze, fearing the panda would hold her back. Now that was the least of Meilin's concerns.

"Come on, then!" ordered Meilin. "Come out and do something useful. Maybe you could *eat* a way through the bamboo for me!"

There was a flash of light and sudden movement. A furry weight pressed into her side as Jhi appeared and leaned against her, pushing her against the closest stand of bamboo, making it shake.

"Hey, watch it," protested Meilin. She felt something touch her face, and thinking it an insect, brushed it aside, only to feel more of whatever it was land on her hand. She looked up and saw delicate white flowers falling from the tips of the bamboo high above, like tiny warm snowflakes.

Bamboo flowers.

Meilin had never seen bamboo flowers before. She knew the plants only flowered once every fifty or sixty or even a hundred years, and then they died. All the bamboo plants, all at once.

"The Maze is dying," she whispered, staring up at the tops of the bamboo. Every stand of bamboo she could see was flowering. In a week or two, the bamboo would begin to dry out, crack, and fall. Before that, the floor of the forest would be covered in flowers, attracting great hordes of rats and other animals to this once-in-a-century feast.

With the Maze gone, yet more of Zhong would be completely unprotected. The Conquerors had overrun her poor country through the Wall, and now even its lesser defenses were being torn away. Perhaps even this flowering had been caused by the Devourer somehow.

Jhi sat down heavily and reached up to drag Meilin down next to her with one big paw.

"I can't sit down!" protested Meilin. "I have to find a way out!"

She pushed the panda's paw aside and took a few steps along the left-hand path. Then she hesitated, turned, and took a few steps along the right-hand path. Jhi made a kind of snuffling noise.

"Are you laughing?" demanded Meilin. "This is very serious! I'm lost. I have no food or water. I could die here!"

Jhi patted the ground next to her. It was a very human gesture, and it reminded Meilin of her father, when he wanted her to sit next to him and receive some wisdom. What she wouldn't have given to see him now.

"I haven't got time to sit down!" she rasped. "Come on!"

It really didn't matter *what* path she took now, Meilin thought. She was totally lost. What was important now was speed. She had to get out of the Maze before she died of starvation and thirst.

She set off at a loping run, sure that this time there would be an opening in the tight ranks of bamboo, that the path would lead to a clearing, that she would be in the open lands of Zhong.

Jhi made another noise behind her, but Meilin ignored it. Once again, her spirit animal was proving useless. If only she had Essix! The falcon could fly up and spot the way out.

"You would think a panda might be of *some* use in a bamboo forest!" muttered Meilin. She ran on another fifty yards, and came to yet another intersection of paths. She could go left, right, or straight ahead. They all looked exactly the same: long narrow tracks between great stands of bamboo.

Meilin stopped and looked back. Jhi was following her slowly but steadfastly. As the girl looked, the panda reached up and pulled down a bamboo stem, effortlessly bending it until it broke. The topmost stems came down near the path just behind the girl, showering her once again with flowers. Jhi sauntered along and began to eat, stuffing huge pawfuls of bamboo stems, leaves, and flowers into her mouth.

Meilin felt her own hunger, a pain in her middle that was difficult to ignore. Her mouth would have watered, but it was too dry. She had tried eating the bamboo on the second day, and it had caused stomach cramps that only made her feel hungrier. It was too dry, and there were no soft, new shoots that would have been easier to digest.

"There has to be a way out," she whispered. She looked wildly at the different paths. There really was no difference between them. She had gone right last time. Now she would go left, Meilin thought. Left and then right at the next intersection, and so on. Zigzagging. That would work. She would get *somewhere* that way.

"Come on," she said to Jhi.

This time Meilin didn't run. She just didn't have the energy anymore. But she walked fast, ignoring her hunger pains and rasping throat, the heat and the humidity.

"I *will* find a way out," she whispered. "I *will* get to Zhong. I *will* fight the Devourer and our enemies."

But against that, there was a small voice in her head that whispered a hopeless, constantly repeating thought.

I'm going to die. I'm lost and I'm going to die.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA

CONOR HUNCHED DOWN IN THE FOREPEAK OF THE *TELLUN'S Pride*, the fastest ship in the Greencloak fleet. He was drenched with spray every minute or so as the ship crashed through each rolling wave, but at least he could be alone in his misery. Being wet just felt like a small, suitable punishment for what he had done. Giving up the Iron Boar Talisman of Rumfuss to the enemy . . . even though he still felt like he had no choice, he had to do it to save his family . . . Conor felt hopeless and ashamed.

Not for the first time, Conor wondered if there had been some kind of cosmic mistake. Surely he was meant to be a shepherd and nothing more? He shouldn't be a Greencloak, and he shouldn't have one of the Great Beasts as his spirit animal. He just wasn't cut out to be a hero, and Erdas needed *real* heroes to obtain the talismans of the Great Beasts and defeat the Devourer.

Sharp teeth gently touched the back of his neck. He knew those teeth. It was Briggan, grabbing him by the collar to pull him out of his hidey-hole, as if he were an errant cub.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he said with a sigh.

The wolf let him go and backed up along the deck.

"What is it?"

Briggan turned and went toward the ladder down from the forecastle to the main deck, his claws clattering. At the top of the ladder, he looked back, his piercing blue eyes on Conor.

Conor looked past the wolf. Tarik, Rollan, and Abeke were standing facing each other just behind the mainmast, in a semicircle that had two obvious gaps. At least they were obvious to him. One was his own place, and he supposed Briggan had come to drag him there. The other empty spot was Meilin's. Meilin, who would never have gone off all alone to Zhong if Conor hadn't given in to the Earl of Trunswick and ruined everything. . . .

He considered his companions for a moment. Tarik really was a hero already, their mentor and guide, an experienced older Greencloak. Next to him, with that typical grin on his face, was Rollan, the smart-mouthed city boy. He didn't look like he was paying attention to Tarik, unlike Abeke. She was serious, she liked to do things properly, but she had been kinder to Conor than the others after he had failed them. Perhaps her calm center came from being a hunter. Abeke was patient with people as well as animals. . . .

"Ah, Conor! Come and join us!" called out Tarik. "We're going to try scaling the mast again, using Arax's talisman. You can go first."

"I thought it was Abeke's turn to go first," said Rollan with a thinly veiled glance of contempt at Conor. Conor winced. He'd once thought Rollan a friend, but not anymore. Not since Meilin left . . .

"Yes, it's Abeke's turn," Conor said. "She's better at jumping than I am anyway."

"That's why we practice," said Tarik patiently. "You'll need all your skills when we go after the next talisman."

"What is the next talisman?" said Abeke. "We don't know where another one is."

"And even if we get it," said Rollan, "Conor will probably just give it to the Conquerors anyway!"

"Enough of that!" said Tarik. "I am sure there will be news of one of the other Great Beasts when we get back to Greenhaven. Lenori will have found one for sure."

"I *am* sorry," said Conor, hating the way Rollan wouldn't meet his eye. "You know I am . . . but my family . . ."

"You people and your families," muttered Rollan. "It almost makes me glad mine ditched me early."

"The people we love are our strengths," said Abeke, "but they are our weakness too. When their lives are at stake, it is hard to know what is right."

The concession seemed to surprise Rollan as much as it surprised Conor. "You're letting him off the hook —?"

"I say only that we should try to understand." Abeke's glare was for both of them. "All lives are in danger until the Conquerors are defeated. All families, including my own."

That was a rebuke, one Conor felt he deserved. He bit his lip and reached for Briggan and the reassurance of the wolf's furry neck. But his fingers met empty air. Briggan had moved away. Maybe it was just because the ship had met another wave, bigger than usual, but it felt to Conor as if even his spirit animal didn't want to be associated with him too closely.

"Abeke's right," said Tarik. He spoke calmly, as always, but with considerable force. "Hence the importance of training. Here is the talisman. See how quickly you can reach the maintop."

"With Uraza's help?" asked Abeke. Her leopard was dormant, a tattoo on her forearm. Uraza was not keen on the sea.

Tarik shook his head. "Not this time. See what you can do just jumping with the talisman."

Abeke nodded. Conor looked up, worried for her. The maintop was a small platform only ten feet short of the mainmast's imposing eighty-foot height. It was reached by climbing up the ratlines, narrow nets of ropelike ladders that ran up from the deck. But what they had been practicing was jumping straight from the deck to the first spar, or crosspiece, that went across the mast. This was thirty feet from the deck. It was made even more difficult by the plunging and rolling of the ship.

If Abeke fell, Conor hoped she would try to aim for the sea. Better to fall in the water than be smashed on the deck — unless she landed on one of the rockback whales pulling the ship, of course.

"Focus," Tarik told her. "Concentrate on drawing the talisman's power. Aim for the exact spot you want on the spar, and have your hands ready to take hold when you land."

Abeke stretched her shoulders, then her calves. Uraza was astonishingly dexterous, able to change direction even in midair. Conor didn't know how Abeke would fare without her.

"Go!" said Tarik as the ship settled down in the trough on the far side of a wave.

Abeke jumped. The astonishing power of the Granite Ram propelled her upward with thrilling acceleration. She was headed straight up, like a perfectly shot arrow — and then Conor realized that she was going too fast, jumping *too* high. She was going to hurl way past the first spar. In fact, she was going to go over the top of the mast, miss all the ropes, the spars, everything, and go plummeting down the other side!

Conor gasped as she desperately tucked in her knees and did a somersault in the air to slow herself down. Then, just as she cleared the very top of the mast, she stretched out, reached across, and gripped the thin rope there, the flag halyard used for raising the standard of the Greencloaks, guardians of Erdas. For a second Conor thought it might break, and he would watch Abeke go hurtling on her way to certain death.

But the rope held. Abeke swung around the mast and struck her shins against a horizontal spar. Her grip slipped a yard down the rope before she caught herself, swinging back the other way. The same wooden spar almost cracked her across the head. She avoided it only by executing an inelegant but

effective somersault and kicking her feet against the spar. Finally she slowed enough to climb *down* to the maintop. There, she looked back to the deck seventy feet below. She waved, and Conor waved back with relief.

“That’s one powerful talisman,” said Rollan.

“It responds to Abeke’s natural gifts,” said Tarik, nodding in approval.

“I guess so,” said Rollan. “Hard to see what use a wolf will be up there, eh, Conor?”

Before Conor could decide if that was supposed to be a joke or not, Rollan looked up. Essix, who had taken to perching on one of the stays that supported the mainmast, suddenly launched into the air with a long, falling cry.

“Has she seen something?” Conor asked.

Rollan pointed off to port, across the white-touched blue sea, toward the curved horizon. “There. A bird, I think.”

Tarik was shielding his eyes with his hand and looking as well. “I can’t see anything.”

“Yes, a little black-and-white bird, flying low,” Rollan went on. “It’s kind of skipping over the waves, coming straight for us. Essix can’t be hungry, can she? I fed her this morning!”

“It’s a stormy petrel,” said Tarik. “A messenger bird, like the pigeons of Eura. From Olvan or Lenori, I would guess.”

A thud on the deck behind them made everyone turn. Abeke was there, crouched on one knee, one hand on the deck.

“I climbed down and then jumped from the lowest spar!” she said excitedly. “I knew I could do it. The talisman slowed me as I fell, like a feather drifting. Who’s up next?”

“I think we’ll take a break,” said Tarik. “We have a message.”

“I heard a song about stormy petrels once,” said Rollan guardedly. “Don’t they bring storms or bad luck?”

Conor, who had been straining to see, finally made out a little bird rising up from the sea. It looked like it was bouncing off a wave. The petrel paused on the rail, then skittered to Tarik’s hand. Essix flew overhead and landed on Rollan’s shoulder, fierce amber eyes meeting the petrel’s darting black ones.

Tarik carefully removed a tiny bronze capsule from the petrel’s leg, and held the bird up. It made a squeaking, chattering sound and flew back to the open sea.

“There’s a message in there?” asked Conor. “It looks too small.”

Tarik nodded and twisted the tiny capsule apart. Inside was a scroll the size of his little fingernail. He took it out and unfurled it to a surprising length.

“Onion-skin paper,” he said.

“Is it about Meilin?” asked Conor. He really hoped she was all right. They had been on a scouting mission for a week, to take their minds off the missing girl as well as to train them in seacraft. It hadn’t worked. If only there was good news, that she was safe in Zhong with the Greencloaks there, or returning safely to them even now . . .

“In part,” said Tarik. “It is from Olvan. *‘No news of Meilin. Positive report on location of Dinesh. New orders. Go to Kho Kensit. Rendezvous messenger at Inn of the Bright Moon, outside East Gate of Xin Kao Dai. But beware. Enemy holds city. Good luck.’*”

“Where now?” asked Rollan. “I thought we were going back to Greenhaven, or at least somewhere warm.”

“Kho Kensit is an outlying region of Zhong,” said Tarik. Lumeo, his spirit animal, mimicked his frown, his little otter face all scrunched up. “Xin Kao Dai is the closest port.”

“We can’t just sail into enemy territory,” said Conor. “We’d need an army!”

“It’s a busy port, with travelers from all over,” said Tarik. “If we disguise ourselves and get put ashore at night in one of the ship’s boats . . .”

“I’m good with disguises,” said Rollan. “There’s a clothing box in the first mate’s cabin. There’s bound to be some cloaks that aren’t green, plus other stuff we can use. Hey, we could dress up as minstrels! They always seem to come and go without any problems.”

“We don’t have any instruments,” said Tarik. “Nor the skill to play them.”

“What about shadow puppets?” suggested Conor. “A troupe visited Trunswick once. We’d only need a big sheet — we could borrow a sail — cut out some figures and get a big lantern. The troupe I saw did a show about all the different kinds of sheep, you know: Amayan Blackbelly, Euran Longhaired White. . . .”

“Sheep puppets!” exclaimed Rollan, as though he’d never heard anything more ridiculous.

“We will have a day to think of something, with the whales at full stretch,” Tarik said. “I’ll ask the captain when I inform him of the course change. He may have an idea we haven’t thought of.”

Abeke was rereading the message.

“Dinesh is the elephant, isn’t he?” she said, pointing at the tiny script. “I mean *the* Elephant. The Great Beast.”

“Yes,” said Tarik. “Keeper of the Slate Elephant Talisman. Which we must obtain.”

Abeke looked at Conor.

“We’ll keep this one when we get it, right?” said Rollan.

Conor nodded miserably.

“Of course we will,” said Tarik. “But for now, you should resume your practice, while the sea is relatively calm. Who’s next?”

“You go,” blurted Conor to Rollan. “I . . . I feel a bit seasick suddenly. I have to go lie down.”

He turned and stumbled away, almost falling over Briggan before dragging himself alongside the rail to the aft companionway, and then down to the cabins below. The wolf patiently followed at his heels.

Conor didn't really feel seasick. He just felt ashamed. How could he practice when it was clear Rollan didn't trust him? Tarik and Abeke were trying, he could tell, but not Rollan. Every time Conor said something, Rollan was quick to put him back in his place. How could he help get a new talisman from another Great Beast when Rollan wouldn't let him forget how horribly wrong everything had gone with the Iron Boar?

Adding to his misery was the thought of sneaking into occupied territory, one of a handful of people against the full might of the Conquerors. Conor wasn't a coward, but what might happen if they were caught was too horrible to contemplate. He wasn't just worried about himself, but about Briggan too, and the people he had come to think of as friends, no matter what they thought of him. They would all have to contribute. There wouldn't be room for mistakes.

“I'll do whatever it takes,” he whispered to Briggan as he sat on his narrow bunk and drew the wolf close. “I'll show them I can be a real Greencloak!”



XIN KAO DAI

“XIN KAO DAI,” THE CAPTAIN OF THE *TELLUN’S PRIDE* HAD SAID. “A pretty harbor, but prone to morning fogs this time of year. There’s a small island very near the southern headland. We can stand off after midnight, row you to the island, and you can wade ashore at low tide. Cross the fish traps and you’ll make landfall easily in the fisherfolk’s part of the city.”

Thinking of the captain’s words two mornings later, Rollan wished they’d come up with a plan that didn’t involve getting so wretchedly *wet*.

Captain Darish had been right about the fog. It wove around Rollan, thick and gray, shrouding the first faint rays of the sun. He wasn’t cold, which was a surprise. He’d never encountered a warm fog before. But that didn’t make him any less uncomfortable. The moisture was always pooling into droplets that trickled down the back of his neck and into his ears. When it dripped into his eyes, he had to blink and shake his head to fling the droplets away.

The sea was also warm, a detail that Rollan told himself to be glad of, since he was in it up to his waist.

“Whose great idea was this, anyway?” he muttered, doing his best to keep up with Tarik. Conor was following Rollan, and Abeke brought up the rear. All four of them had large shadow puppets strapped in bundles across their backs, the pieces of bodies and limbs poking above their heads and out to the sides. Tarik carried a great storm lantern strapped atop his pack.

The idea of telling the story of the Fallen had been Abeke’s. She had described seeing such performances in Nilo, one with a Gerathon that had been made of no less than thirty segments, able to

writhe and slide and open its mouth to devour everything in its path.

That detail hadn't thrilled Tarik.

The screen was by far the heaviest single piece, and Conor had volunteered to carry it, perhaps hoping it would make the others think better of him. Rollan didn't really understand why the shepherd had handed over the talisman to the Conquerors, since he didn't have a family himself. He didn't get why Meilin had chosen to run off either, to save someone who might already be dead, for all she knew. None of it made any sense at all to Rollan, who was just trying to keep his head above water, metaphorically as well as literally, at that moment.

"How far to the mainland?" he asked Tarik, keeping his voice low so it didn't carry across the water. The fog was so thick that he could only see a few paces ahead. They were all nervous about creeping into Zhong, where one mistake could leave them captives of the Conquerors.

But on the other hand, Meilin was in Zhong. Somewhere. Rollan frowned as he found himself wondering where she was, and how soon he might see her again. He shook his head, trying to make the picture of Meilin in his head go away. This was no time to be thinking about someone who had chosen to run off and leave him . . . or . . . leave them.

"Are you all right?" asked Conor.

"Water in my ear," growled Rollan.

"Almost there," said Tarik. "I can see fish traps ahead."

"Are they dangerous?" Rollan had never seen one.

"Only to fish."

"You sure?" he said. "That'd be almost too eas —"

His right foot sank deep into an underwater hole and suddenly the surface of the sea came a lot closer to neck level than he liked. Splashing and spluttering, he barely managed to avoid falling face-forward, and was only hauled upright by strong hands from behind him. Conor.

"Are you all right?" Abeke's voice called from farther back.

Rollan pulled away from Conor.

"Can everybody stop asking if I'm all right? I'm fine."

He was fine, now that he had both feet back on the seabed. Annoyed, but not hurt in any way. Rollan knew he should thank Conor for helping him, but everything was too raw and complicated. All he wanted was to get out of the water and onto dry land, where he could run from the things that tried to hurt him, instead of splashing along at a painfully slow pace.

But at least he'd stopped thinking about Meilin.

"We must keep moving," said Tarik. "We need to be ashore and past the fisherfolk's huts before the fog lifts."

The Greencloak set a much quicker pace, and Rollan struggled to keep up, now wary of invisible sinkholes. And fish traps.

“Remember, keep your sleeves down and tied at the wrist to hide your tattoos,” Tarik said. “Call your spirit animals only if it is a matter of life or death. Obviously, this doesn’t include you, Rollan. Hunting birds are common here, but I doubt normal for a troupe of puppeteers, so if Essix will stay aloft . . .”

Rollan wasn’t promising anything. He was still embarrassed that he couldn’t get Essix to adopt the dormant form. But at least the falcon could fly around without attracting attention. She was up there somewhere now, above the fog.

The fish traps turned out to be man-high, wickerwork tubes set into the sand. There were dozens of them, placed only a few feet apart so they formed a kind of strange forest emerging from the sea. Tarik led the way between the traps, which were full of flopping silver fish that had entered on the high tide and now couldn’t get out.

The others followed him, moving faster as they waded steadily into shallower water. Soon they left the sea itself behind, dripping and splashing as quietly as they could.

The light was rising as the sun threatened to breach the eastern horizon. Through the muddy light Rollan made out a gently sloping, sandy beach, lined with drawn-up fishing boats. Behind the boats, a few dark outlines of houses could be seen through the fog.

There was a taller structure to their left, at the other end of the beach. A watchtower, fortunately still heavily shrouded by fog, so that only its lower wall was visible, and the faint red glow from the torches burning.

Tarik waved them on. They were painfully exposed on the beach. Hurrying up the sand, they followed a track that led to a line of fisherfolk’s houses. If they weren’t under cover by the time the sun burned the mist away, they’d be out of the fish traps and into a prison cell.

Upon reaching the houses, Tarik changed direction suddenly, leaving the track to hurry along behind a wall. The others went with him, Abeke only just reaching the shadowed wall as three fisherfolk came out of the swirling fog and started down to the beach with baskets on their backs and fish spears in their hands.

Red-tinged light spread through the fog. At the same time, Rollan had a momentary vision of the sun, a bright sliver of it above the horizon. He was seeing it from somewhere above the mist, through eyes much keener than his. He blinked and realized with a shock that the image had come from Essix.

He was seeing through the falcon’s eyes!

Rollan’s jaw dropped open, unfortunately just in time to catch a passing fly. He spat it out, hardly noticing because he was so amazed at what had just happened.

He had seen what Essix was seeing!

Rollan wanted to tell everyone. But it wasn't the right time. The sun was higher than expected; they were running later than they had planned. The working day of the city was about to begin. They had to get out of the fisherfolk's village and into the city proper before it was too late to merge with the crowd.

"We've got to move," Rollan whispered to Tarik. "Now!"

"Maybe we should try to hide until nightfall," said Conor nervously. "If everyone goes out fishing, the houses will all be empty."

"That's a terrible idea," Rollan snapped. "Families stay behind. And there might be patrols. We have to go now! The sun is up and it'll burn off this fog really fast."

"Rollan's right," said Tarik. He looked around. "If we can move between the houses, perhaps we can stay out of sight. The next quarter is a market. If we can get there . . ."

"Right," said Rollan, taking charge. He wasn't going to wait around for any more of Conor's hopeless ideas. "Follow me."

"Wait," said Tarik, gripping Rollan's shoulder before he could move out. "I'll go first. If we are seen by guards, you three can break off and run to safety."

"Not going to happen," Rollan said firmly. "No offense, Tarik, but even without your green cloak, you still stand out. Hang back and pretend to be our bodyguard or something."

Tarik lifted one shoulder and jutted out his jaw, simultaneously ducking his head and affecting a limp, taking on the perfect appearance of a brute. Rollan wondered if Tarik had more street smarts than he had given him credit for.

Rollan nodded approvingly. He listened for a moment, then started off along the back of the house, the others following. All his senses were alert, and he felt very alive. It was good to be back in a city, even on the fringe of one he didn't know. He would show the others what he could do, starting by getting into the market quarter.

He led the way behind four more simple wooden houses, and then a quick sprint through the fog to a line of posts where nets were hung for repair. Crawling under the suspended nets gave them perfect cover for a good twenty yards of easy travel. But then even Rollan was stumped. He held up his hand to halt everyone, and stared ahead.

The fog was really clearing now. With the increased visibility, Rollan saw there was a broad road ahead, separating the fishing village from the market stalls. People were already getting out their wares and exchanging shouted greetings about the fog.

But right in the middle of the road, there were two guards, a man and a woman. They looked like typical city militia to Rollan, in their badly kept leathers and dented helmets. But the woman had a

spirit animal next to her, some kind of stoat, and that was not normal for a simple city guard. She had to be one of the Devourer's followers, one of the Conquerors who had taken over Xin Kao Dai.

"What do we do now?" whispered Conor.

Rollan held an impatient finger to his lips. That stoat might give the guard superior hearing, or it might notice them itself. He was thinking furiously.

Abeke mimed shooting an arrow. Her bow and quiver of arrows were underneath the shadow puppets.

Rollan shook his head. Shooting guards in a city? That was a sure way to get caught. They had to be distracted somehow, not killed or wounded.

He thought for a moment, slowly shrugged off his pack, and settled it on the ground behind him. The others clustered close, under the nets.

"I'm going to distract the guards. When they're gone, just walk across the street and go into the market, carrying my pack. I'll meet you at the . . . biggest pie seller."

"What if there isn't a pie seller?" whispered Conor.

"There's always a pie seller," Rollan said indignantly.

"In Zhong?" asked Abeke. "I don't think they eat pies."

Rollan hadn't thought of that. He was sure they ate something *like* pies.

Tarik nudged him and pointed across the street to a tower standing tall above the market stalls, about half a mile in. Rollan let out a short sigh of relief.

"Right, we'll meet on the shaded side of that tower. I'll find you. Essix will see you for sure."

"It's risky," said Tarik. "But I see no choice. Take care of yourself, Rollan."

"I always do," said Rollan with a confident wink.

He pulled out his knife and cut away a big square of fishing net, winding it around his head like a turban and letting a piece fall across his face. Then he took off his blue sailor's jacket and reversed it, to show the paler underside before putting it back on again inside out.

"Wait till they run after me," he whispered, and walked out from under the nets, straight at the guards. They were talking together and didn't notice him at first, not until the stoat stiffened up and made a hissing noise.

Rollan let out a terrifying scream and staggered across into a stand on the edge of the market that was selling beads and necklaces. Dragging down dozens of necklaces and spilling beads all across the road, he pointed at the stoat and screamed, "It spat poison in my eyes!"

The guards swore and advanced upon him, the stoat leaping ahead. Rollan tipped over a basket of beads in front of them, dove under the stallkeeper's reaching arms, and ran into the depths of the market, still howling.

“Poison! Poison!”



SECRET SIGNALS

AS SOON AS THE GUARDS RAN AFTER ROLLAN, TARIK, ABEKE and Conor moved, sauntering across the road into the market. Their hearts were pounding and all three felt sure that at any moment someone would shout . . . but no one was watching. Everyone nearby was staring at the trail of destruction left by Rollan and the pursuing guards.

By the time the marketgoers turned back to their business, the three disguised Greencloaks were standing in front of a hot food stall, waiting in line to buy a rice-and-meat mixture served on a green leaf. To Abeke it smelled delicious, much more enticing than the food on the ship.

“Hey, puppeteers!” said the food seller, ladling the spicy mixture onto the laid-out leaves.

“Where’re you doing your show? My daughter loves the shadow plays.”

“An inn outside the East Gate,” said Tarik.

“Oh, the Bright Moon,” said the food seller. “Best rice wine in Kho Kensit! Another reason to come see your show. There you are. Three bits.”

Tarik handed over three small silver coins, carefully chosen to be from Eura, Zhong, and Amaya.

“We’ve not been here long,” he said conversationally as he handed the food to Conor and Abeke.

“I was worried by all this talk of the Conquerors and the change of government. But everything seems quiet enough.”

“All quiet here,” said the food seller, suddenly looking down. “Move along, move along, there’s people waiting.”

The trio left, joining the moving throngs of people. Abeke glanced back at the food seller and was alarmed to see him staring after her. She hoped he would put selling his wares ahead of alerting the guards to strangers. Something Tarik had said made the man suspicious.

As the sun rose, more and more of the cityfolk came out to make their purchases in the market. The narrow lanes between the stalls became much more crowded, noisier, and dustier.

“I hope Rollan hasn’t gotten himself caught,” muttered Conor to Abeke as they approached the tower that dominated the center of the market.

“He *has* been a bit distracted since Meilin left,” said Abeke. “I mean, I’m sure he won’t get caught. Fairly sure . . .”

“We might all get caught,” muttered Conor, casting anxious eyes over toward a pair of guards who were trying knives at a nearby stall.

“He said the shadowed side, didn’t he?” asked Abeke. She was beginning to get really worried. Where was Rollan?

She was just turning her head to the left when Rollan popped up next to her. He was no longer wearing the fish-net turban and his jacket was the right way out. As Abeke gaped at him, he took his own pack back and slung it over his shoulder.

“Thanks,” he said. “You ready to head over to the East Gate?”

“We are,” said Tarik. “The guards . . . ?”

“Led them on a wild-goose chase to a cesspit where the marketeers throw their trash. A particularly horrible one, judging by the smell. They, um, tripped, and won’t be going anywhere for a while.”

“Well done, Rollan.”

Rollan puffed up his chest. “Follow me, then,” he said.

“We must avoid being overconfident,” Tarik warned, before Rollan could dart off again. “Ask Essix to check the way ahead.”

“I have.”

“She must stay up high. If she’s spotted as a spirit animal —”

“Don’t worry, she’s being careful,” said Rollan with a flash of irritation. But he did seem calmer, and that made Abeke feel less nervous in turn. Keeping a low profile was the priority. Stunts like the one Rollan had just performed were dangerous, even if they were clever.

“That was quick thinking back there,” she told him as they wandered through the market, pretending to be innocent passers-through. “I guess you had a lot of practice back in Concorba.”

Rollan made a rolling gesture with his hand, one way and then the other.

“What does that mean?” asked Abeke.

“Oh, it’s a sign the street people use,” he said. “It means ‘just a bit’ or ‘not so much.’”

“We have hunting signs,” said Abeke. “It isn’t possible to speak when the stalkers close on the prey.”

“Show me some,” said Rollan. “I’ll teach you the ones we used in Concorba.”

They traded Amayan and Niloan hand signals as they wove through the crowd. Some of the gestures were similar. A quick twist of his left hand meant “pickpocket” to Rollan, but “take cover” to Abeke. Spying guards at one end of a laneway, Abeke pointed with two fingers over her head to an empty stall, and he understood her intentions immediately. She ducked through the stall and out the rear, followed closely by the others.

A stall owner called out angrily to them as they passed. Abeke couldn’t understand the words, but she recognized the look of hate in his eyes, and the anxiety of the other nearby marketgoers.

Eventually they left the market quarter and the itchy feeling along Abeke’s spine began to ease slightly. They climbed up a zigzag road into a more prosperous quarter, where merchants had their permanent shops. The streets were still busy, so it was easy for the foursome to mingle with the moving crowd. But they still stood out, with clothes that were damp from their early-morning wade and disassembled puppets towering over their heads.

When they neared the East Gate, the foot traffic slowed and began to thin out. They could see the city wall running to the right and left, and the great gatehouse in the middle. A flag was flying above it, showing the blazon of the Conquerors. The great gate beneath was only half open, one of its two leaves shut. Guards stood in the open space, inspecting everyone going in and out, a line of people patiently waiting on either side.

“Remember your names,” whispered Tarik. He meant their false names, practiced on the ship. “We’re puppeteers going to do a show at the Inn of the Bright Moon, just stick to that.”

He stopped talking as the line inched forward. There were half a dozen guards in the gateway, actively inspecting travelers as they passed through. Two of them had spirit animals, one a brutish, heavy-shouldered dog that sniffed every traveler, and the other a massive spider that sat on its partner’s shoulder, a thick strand of web hanging from its spinnerets down her arm.

“Names and business!” snapped the guard with the dog spirit animal.

“Mosten,” said Tarik. “Shadow puppeteer, going to do a show at the Inn of the Bright Moon. These are my apprentices, Olk, Snan, and Pahan.”

The dog sniffed at Tarik, then circled around and sniffed each of the others in turn. But it didn’t then sit back on its haunches. Instead it sniffed everyone again, most particularly Abeke. Then it looked up and growled at her.

“Smagish doesn’t like you,” growled the guard. “You smell funny.”

“I just played with a kitten,” she said quickly. “I wanted to buy it, but Mosten wouldn’t let me. Said we had to spend our silvers on something useful.”

“Silvers?” asked the guard. “You got money?”

“Of course,” said Tarik. “They wanted five silvers for the kitten, which is robbery.”

“Vagrants with no money wandering around is robbery waiting to happen,” said the guard. “Show me.”

Tarik held out five silvers in his palm. The guard looked around, then scooped the coins up.

“That’s a fine,” he said. “For playing with cats and wasting my time. Off you go.”

They started forward, but suddenly the woman with the spider spoke.

“Wait,” she said.

Rollan tensed, waiting for the spider to jump, or for a sudden attack. But the spider just sat there, and the woman didn’t go for her weapons.

“What about me?” she asked. “Where’s my share?”

“We’ve only got three more between us,” whined Rollan.

“Hand ’em over!”

Tarik shrugged and made a show of searching his pouch before he reluctantly pulled out some more coins. The woman took them with a disgruntled expression.

“You could give one to her,” suggested Rollan to the dog-faced guard. “Then you’d have four each.”

“I already got mine,” said the first guard.

“Give me one,” said the woman.

They started to argue. Rollan moved off, making the hand sign that meant “hurry” to Abeke. But she needed no sign, nor did the others. They all rushed through the gate, leaving the guards bickering behind them.

Past the gate, Abeke was surprised to see dozens of tiny houses built up close to the city wall, which wouldn’t be allowed in any of the cities she had seen in Eura. Row after row of narrow doorways opened onto tiny hutches barely large enough for chickens but in which whole families lived. People squabbled and fought over scraps with scrawny dogs that themselves looked more like rats. Continuing along the road, she realized that these areas belonged to the very poor. These roughly made huts with makeshift roofs and walls could be quickly knocked down if the ground in front of the wall needed to be cleared to help defend against an enemy attack. Only they hadn’t done it, and now the Conquerors had taken over.

“Ugh,” said Abeke, crinkling her nose with distaste at a strong smell of sewage. Such uncleanliness would never have been tolerated in her village. “I wanted to get out of the city, but this

is even worse.”

“We will be out into the country soon enough,” said Tarik quietly. “We just need to meet the messenger and find out where we need to go.”

“Is that the inn?” asked Rollan, pointing to a large building that stood head and shoulders above the surrounding shacks. It also had a low wall around it, to keep the surrounding slum at bay. Above the wooden gate there was a hanging sign, showing a bright crescent moon rising from behind a mountain.

“It is,” said Tarik, “but we don’t want to stay here. I’ll seek out the messenger and we’ll be on our way as quickly as possible.”

They walked under the inn sign and through the gate, and then stopped in their tracks. The courtyard of the inn was full of soldiers. Dozens of them were sitting around on upturned barrels. Even worse, there were dozens of spirit animals as well.

The whole place was an enemy camp!



INN OF THE BRIGHT MOON

CONOR HESITATED, AND BEGAN TO TURN AROUND. BUT TARIK took his arm and held him firm. “Running will only make us look suspicious,” he whispered.

Rollan agreed. “Got to pretend we belong here, even though we don’t. Keep going!”

Hunching close together, the quartet moved toward the front door of the inn, along the narrow lane between the soldiers. Heads turned as they passed, conversation stopped, and they felt the stares of both humans and animals. A thin snake coiled around the neck of a soldier tasted the air with its flickering tongue, and aimed its unblinking eyes at them, as though sensing something odd about them. Two mismatched weasels stopped fighting to stare. Conor braced himself to release Briggan at the first sign that they had been discovered. Hiding was all very well, but he wasn’t afraid to fight if there was no other choice.

Just as Tarik put his foot down on the first of the three steps to the front door, it was flung open. A tall man in a not terribly white apron, with a belt of cups around his waist — indicating he was the innkeeper — appeared in the doorway and threw up his arms in relief.

“Puppeteers!” he cried. “I sent for actors, minstrels, anything! But puppeteers are perfect. How much for a show, and can you start *very soon* now?”

Tarik looked momentarily startled, and Rollan stepped into the breach.

“A dozen silvers and dinner,” he said. “But we’ll need it to be a bit darker for the show. Say the sixth hour.”

“Done!” exclaimed the innkeeper. He looked around at the seated soldiers, who had returned to their card games, drinks, and conversation. “Name’s Bowzeng. I’ve got a troop of fifty Conquerors billeted here, bored as anything and needing distraction, and not from breaking up my furniture, if you please. Come in.”

He turned around and clattered back inside. Abeke pulled at Rollan’s sleeve.

“Have you gone crazy?” she whispered. “We don’t know how to do a show!”

Conor nodded vigorously in agreement. He had helped the ship’s carpenter build the puppets, but had never once tried to use them.

“We won’t have to,” whispered Tarik. “Rollan knows what he’s doing. Follow his lead.”

Rollan glowed at the senior Greencloak’s words, and Conor felt a twinge of jealousy. The puppets were *his* idea. Without them, they’d have been captured already.

Inside the inn, there was a large common room full of even more soldiers. Bowzeng indicated a slightly raised platform down at the far end.

“You can put your screen across the front there,” he said. “There’s hooks in the ceiling. I will announce the performance . . . ah . . . What is the name of your troupe?”

“Mosten’s Most Marvelous Puppets,” said Rollan. “We’ll set the screen up and get ready, but like I said, it’s still too light.”

“We can close the shutters,” said Bowzeng. He looked around again. The soldiers were sitting and drinking, occasionally bursting into vigorous argument over cards and dice. Many of the soldiers showed the tattoos of the Marked, but the spirit animals were either in dormant form or sticking close to their partners. From the way Bowzeng’s eyes darted around, he expected the Conquerors to cut loose any second.

“We need the time to prepare everything,” said Rollan easily. He led the way over to the platform and set down his pack, helped Abeke with hers, and took off the rolled-up sail. “You carry on with whatever you need to do, Master Bowzeng.”

The innkeeper looked troubled, but bustled away and started calling out to one of his serving people.

“More of everything for our honored guests!” he called out.

“Get the screen up,” hissed Rollan to Abeke, but Conor knew he meant him as well. Rollan just wouldn’t look him in the eye. “Uh, Mosten, I think we should get some fire buckets to have by the big lantern. Can you help me find some?”

Tarik nodded, and the two of them slipped off into the kitchens.

“Come on, then,” said Abeke encouragingly to Conor. He started, and realized he was still thinking about Rollan ignoring him. Woolgathering, which was never helpful. He started to unroll the sail, Abeke cheerfully grabbing the other end and pitching in.

They had just managed to get the sail hung up evenly across the end of the common room, after some trial and error, and set up the big lantern on a stool behind it, when Tarik and Rollan returned. Both were carrying large wooden buckets slopping over with water.

Shielded by the screen from the soldiers, the four gathered around the packs and started to pull out the pieces of the shadow puppets.

“I found the messenger,” whispered Tarik. “We worked together a few years ago and he recognized me the moment we went out back. He’s working here as a cook. He has good news: One of our finest people, a Greencloak named Lishay, has found Dinesh. We have to meet up with Lishay as soon as possible. The rendezvous is deep in Kho Kensit, quite a distance from here. Fortunately, we can get a good part of the way there by canal and river. The jungles of Kho Kensit are not easy to travel otherwise.”

“If we leave the puppets and everything, we’ll make better time,” said Abeke.

“Agreed,” said Conor, who was heartily sick of lugging the heavy screen around. “We can sneak out the back way and be miles away before anyone notices.”

“That’s my plan exactly,” said Rollan with a satisfied smirk. “I told you we wouldn’t have to do a show.”

They emptied their packs and left the puppets leaning up against a dirty wall. Using the distraction of a particularly bawdy song, which had the entire inn joining in for its chorus, they proceeded in a line with Tarik at the lead through the kitchens and out a small back gate.

They found themselves in an alley that was stacked with empty barrels, broken pots, and other rubbish from the inn.

“See? Easy,” said Rollan, still grinning.

“We were lucky,” said Tarik in cautionary tones. “I think that innkeeper was right. He will have trouble there tonight.”

“Particularly without a puppet show,” said Conor. “I feel a bit sorry for him.”

“Hey, we have to do whatever’s necessary for our mission,” said Rollan. “Most of us, anyway.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Conor, bristling.

“Just what I said,” said Rollan easily.

“I know what you meant,” said Conor.

“Rollan’s right,” said Abeke, although she cast an apologetic glance at Conor. “Within reason. Beware the lion hunter becoming the lion.”

“What does *that* mean?” Rollan asked.

“It’s an old saying from my village,” she told him. “Some people turn into the thing they’re fighting, if they’re not careful.”

“Who’s not being careful? We’re safe now, aren’t we?”

“Not yet,” said Tarik. “There’s a barge waiting for us, but the canal is along the street and then down the hill. Without the puppets, we will be dangerously exposed.”

Rollan may have lived in a city, but Conor had lived in a town, and people were the same there. He was determined to show Rollan that not everything he said was stupid.

“Pick up something that could be cargo we’re taking to the barge,” he said, indicating the rubbish.

He picked up a small barrel himself. Rollan took a rice wine pitcher and Abeke a sack that she turned around to hide the hole in the back. Tarik chose a crate, putting his pack in it before hoisting it up on his shoulder.

They were just setting out when a slurred voice called out from the back gate.

“Where you going? S’posed to do a show!”

It was a soldier. One of the Conquerors. A particularly large soldier, standing in the doorway and scowling.

Rollan, Abeke, and Conor moved as one, without the need for speech.

Conor stepped to the side and swung his barrel in front of the soldier’s feet, sending the man tumbling forward. Abeke opened her sack and jammed it over the soldier, muffling his shouts, and Rollan hit his sack-wrapped head with the rice wine pitcher. The man collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

“Well done!” said Tarik.

The three youngsters looked at each other. Rollan grinned at Conor. For a moment Conor felt a kind of weight lifting from his spirit, and he hesitantly began to smile back. Then Rollan seemed to remember himself. He frowned, and Conor too turned the beginnings of his smile into a look of concentration. There was no time for congratulations, anyway. The sound of raised voices was growing louder from inside the inn. Pausing only to pick up a new barrel, sack, and pitcher, they sped off along the alley.

Behind them, the door crashed open.

“Hey!”

“This way,” said Tarik, turning left along a lane that was barely larger than the alley. Conor heard something smash behind them, but he didn’t turn to see. Heavy footsteps followed them. He had to concentrate on keeping ahead of them.

A whistle sounded, two rising pitches, and suddenly there were Conquerors ahead of them too, at the end of the lane, alerted by their compatriot's signal.

"Through here." Tarik ducked into an entranceway and along a cobbled area full of pigs. The stones were slippery underfoot. "Yah!" said Tarik, slapping one of the pigs on the rump as he passed. "Yah!"

They ducked into another lane and this time Conor did glance over his shoulder. Two Conquerors were hot on their heels. The first tripped over a pig. The second slipped on the cobbles.

Conor grinned and returned his attention forward to where Tarik was hurrying the others along the lane.

The grin was replaced by a gasp of panic as a Conqueror suddenly burst through a doorway immediately to Conor's right, beefy hands clutching for his hair.

"Got you!"

Conor ducked and threw the barrel at his face. The man was between him and Rollan, so without even thinking Conor backpedaled and went the other way up the lane, as fast as his legs could carry him. The Conqueror roared and followed, moving heavily but with frightening speed.

At the end of the lane there was no time for active thought. His heart racing, Conor turned right, ending up close to the wall again, and there were people everywhere. He ducked and wove between them, but he could hear the Conqueror right behind him, people shouting and screaming as he pushed them aside.

Fear helped him run faster. He could almost feel his pursuer's breath on his neck, and his shoulders tensed with the expectation of a sudden blow, maybe even a knife thrust —

Ahead, two more Conquerors stepped into his path and raised their weapons. Excited spirit animals — a cat and a frill-necked lizard — hissed. Conor couldn't fight them on his own. He had to find some way to escape — but where? There were only walls around him, the thin, narrow walls of Xin Kao Dai's shantytown.

That gave him an idea. These places weren't constructed with solid stone like back home. The walls were literally paper-thin here; he could burst through them if he had to. But as well as paper there were hanging screens made of cloth. He pushed one aside and ran through to the home behind it.

A young man was sitting at a clay pot, stirring something thin and gruel-like over a miserly flame. He looked up in surprise.

"Sorry," gasped Conor, crashing through to the next house along.

Behind him, he heard paper walls tearing.

He paused for a moment to gasp for air, his eyes wide and searching, hoping he would see some new way out.

A small hand gripped his. Conor looked down and saw a young child tugging at him, as though telling him to follow. Behind her, an elderly woman nodded and made an urgent shooing gesture.

The girl pulled his hand harder. The shouting and the wall-destroying noises were too loud and too close.

Conor let the girl lead him away. She took him at a skipping run through a series of cloth and paper tunnels, deeper into the shantytown. People watched him as he passed through, led by the girl along a maze he could never have navigated on his own. None of them interfered.

Slowly, the sound of pursuit fell behind them. Still the girl tugged his hand. He followed her until they reached the edge of the shantytown, where she carefully peeled back a cloth the color of mud. The light seemed bright to Conor's eyes, and he had to blink twice before he understood what he was seeing.

It was the canal. A long barge floated on it, heavily laden with cloth bales, and there, next to it, were his friends. Their faces were set with tension, and Abeke kept glancing up the street, searching for Conor. Rollan looked particularly worried — or was that simply annoyance? Conor couldn't tell.

“Thank you,” he told the girl before running to join them. He wished he had some of the silvers Tarik had given the guards at the gate. But she didn't stick around to accept his thanks. With a quick smile, she turned and disappeared into the shadows.

Conor stepped out into the light, waved, and hurried across the exposed thoroughfare to join the others at the side of the barge that would take them into the jungle, toward Dinesh and the Slate Elephant Talisman.



XUE

NIGHT CAME, AND THE RATS CAME CREEPING THROUGH THE bamboo to eat the fallen flowers. Meilin kicked at them, but in her weakened state they did little more than retreat a foot or so. Her stomach was an aching void, her throat felt as if she had swallowed a thornbush, and her limbs felt both heavy and distant. The rats didn't consider her a threat, even with her quarterstaff. How long, she wondered in weary desperation, until they started considering her *food*?

She had lost track of the days. Once again, she was at an intersection of paths in the Great Bamboo Maze, and there was no indication of which one would lead to freedom, water, or any kind of sustenance. Every strategy she had tried had met with failure.

Jhi butted her hip and sat down heavily, dragging at her with her paw.

Meilin hesitated, then gave in and slowly sat down, almost collapsing into a bed of bamboo flowers. She didn't have the strength to fight her spirit animal anymore.

Jhi raised a paw to her ear and moved her head very slowly from side to side.

“Listen? You want me to listen?” asked Meilin. “To what?” Meilin frowned, but she listened.

At first all she could hear was the faint rustling of the bamboo as some breeze high above moved the topmost shoots. It certainly didn't penetrate down below, where the air remained humid and still.

She heard the rats rustling around her, occasionally squeaking at each other. There were so many of them, growing fat on the fallen flowers while she starved.

Jhi leaned against her, and Meilin felt her anger and frustration diminishing. She felt a calmness descend upon her, and she became aware that she was breathing in the same rhythm as the panda. A

sense of peace was flowing into her through the link she had with her spirit animal.

She did not know how long she sat, just listening. When Jhi finally heaved herself up, it was night and there was a rat nibbling the toe of Meilin's left shoe. She swished her quarterstaff at it, and it retreated, rustling in its haste to get away from her.

The Maze was now completely dark, the thick bamboo above hiding even the starlight. Meilin couldn't see anything at all, not even her own hand held up close to her face. She stood up too, holding Jhi's fur just behind the panda's head. Despite the darkness and the rats and the incessant gnawing of her gut, she still felt calm. Panda and girl stood like statues, hardly breathing. Her pulse quickened as she heard a faint noise far away, because it was not a natural sound. It was metallic, the soft clang of metal, like a fork upon a tin plate.

"There's someone nearby," whispered Meilin.

Jhi stirred at her side and began to walk away. Meilin clutched at her fur.

"Where are you going?"

The panda stopped to let Meilin get a better grip, then ambled off again. Meilin followed her in the total darkness, trusting that her spirit animal would find the way.

It was strangely liberating to just follow the panda in the dark. Meilin couldn't see the thick bamboo walls of the Maze. She couldn't see where they were crossing intersections of the paths, and so couldn't feel the terror of not being able to choose the right one.

Meilin shut her eyes and placed all her trust in Jhi. Even the day before, Meilin would probably have shouted at the panda, asked Jhi where she was taking her, if she was taking her anywhere at all. But tonight she didn't. She stayed calm, and kept her eyes shut, and followed.

Jhi changed direction. Meilin's shoulder crashed against some bamboo stalks, but not hard. The descent of night had cooled the air. It was almost peaceful. All Meilin had to do was hold on and walk slowly.

How long they walked toward the faint metal noise she didn't know. They moved very slowly, and every now and then Jhi would stop and reach between the tall bamboo for some smaller plant, pulling it down and breaking it until she got the succulent shoots at the top, every time showering Meilin with flowers and small insects.

The sound grew louder and clearer as they walked, the panda unhesitatingly choosing each turn in the Maze. Meilin wondered what the sound could be. It was very soft and faint, but certainly metallic. She was sure she never would have heard it while she was running around, or even walking, desperately trying different paths.

Then Jhi turned a corner and Meilin saw the faintest glow through her closed eyelids. She opened her eyes, and up ahead she saw the soft light of a campfire. An iron tripod stood above the fire, with a

traveling cauldron suspended from it. There was a small, hunched-over figure stirring the pot with a long metal ladle. That was the sound Meilin had heard. Not the harsh ring of a spoon hitting the cauldron, just the soft scrape and ting as the ladle went gently around and around inside the rim.

As Meilin drew closer, she could see the little figure was a silver-haired old woman wrapped in a dark cloak. A very tall pack was propped nearby against the bamboo, a pack loaded with small pots and pans and spoons and knives, a kind of traveling kitchen. The woman was cooking. Meilin couldn't tell what was in the pot, but it smelled absolutely wonderful.

Suddenly all her hunger, forgotten in her long walk with Jhi, returned. It felt like a physical punch to her gut. It was all she could do not to double over and fall piteously to the ground.

“Greetings, Old Mother,” croaked Meilin politely. Her voice hardly sounded human, she thought, her throat was so dry. “May . . . a lost traveler ask for some food and water? I have money; I can pay.”

The woman turned her head, her sharp black eyes looking Meilin up and down where she stood in the flickering firelight. Then her eyes darted to Jhi.

“Payment?” she said. “No payment is necessary for aiding the lost. Nor should it be asked. Come, share my fire, my food, my water.”

“Thank you,” said Meilin. She felt weak in the knees, as much with relief as weariness, as she slowly sank down next to the woman. “My name is Meilin. And this is —”

“Jhi,” interrupted the woman. She handed Meilin a small but beautiful porcelain cup and filled it with cool, clear water from a waterskin. “I had heard talk of the return of the Great Beasts. My name is . . . You can call me Xue.”

Meilin barely heard her. The water looked magical by firelight — so clear and bright, as if it were a pure crystal catching the reflection of the red and yellow flames — and when she brought the cup to her lips, she had to fight the instinct to gulp. She knew that would make her sick. Instead she sipped at it, taking one small mouthful and slowly allowing it to trickle down her throat. Her body sang with relief. She almost wept. Perhaps the water *was* magical. It tasted better than any palace cordial.

When the cup was empty, Meilin held out her shaking hands for more. Xue refilled it three times, until finally Meilin judged that she had had enough, for now.

“Would you like some of my stew?” asked Xue.

“Yes, please,” said Meilin. “It smells good. What is it?”

“Rat and bamboo shoots,” said Xue. “There’s no other source of meat left in the forest now. Just thousands and thousands of rats, eating the flowers.”

“Oh,” said Meilin. She hesitated, then said firmly, “I would like some, please, Madam Xue.”

“Just Xue,” said the old woman. She leaned around and opened her pack, drawing out a beautiful porcelain bowl from a padded pocket, and a matching spoon. She ladled a modest helping into the bowl and passed it to Meilin.

She dipped in her spoon and raised it to her mouth, just as a flower fell from above, right into the stew. Xue reached over and picked it out with a pair of very sharp-pointed chopsticks that had apparently come out of her sleeve, the movement so fast Meilin almost didn't see it.

“The bamboo dies, bedecking its own grave with flowers,” said Xue. “It has been a long time since the Maze needed replanting.”

“Who will replant it?” Meilin said bitterly. “The Devourer and his Conquerors have crushed Zhong. They have taken the Wall, and now the Maze dies.”

“All is not lost,” said Xue. “The Devourer's troops are like the skin on a rice pudding, a shallow covering that can easily be torn aside. Besides, there are still those of Zhong who resist.”

“You know where there are loyalists? Enemies of the Devourer?” asked Meilin excitedly, her determination undimmed now that she had food in her stomach. “That's who I have come to find! To help! Where are they?”

Xue looked across at Jhi, who was contentedly chewing on bamboo shoots. The panda flicked her ears.

“There is a camp not far away,” she said. “There have always been hidden fortresses within the Maze. The loyalists gather at the South Fort.”

“The South Fort?” asked Meilin. “But . . . but I was crossing in the north. The Northern Entrance to the Maze.”

“Impossible. You could not have gotten here from there. You must have come in the Southwestern Entrance.”

Meilin stared at the old woman.

“No wonder I got lost,” she said, aghast. “I was following the instructions for the wrong part of the Maze!”

“You are fortunate that you have the companionship of Jhi,” said Xue. “No panda is ever lost in a bamboo forest, even one grown deliberately as a maze.”

“Yes,” said Meilin. “But I didn't listen to her. Not at first.”

“In silence, thought begins,” said Xue. “Eat your stew. Sleep. In the morning, I'll guide you to the South Fort.”

“Thank you,” said Meilin. “I . . . I don't know what I would have done without your help.”

“You have Jhi,” said Xue, as if she didn't even understand what Meilin was talking about.

“Yes,” said Meilin. She turned to the panda, who was pulling down yet another bamboo stalk.

“Thank you, Jhi.”

Jhi didn't stop shredding bamboo shoots, but Meilin felt a feeling of warmth pass between them, a kind of mental hug. She smiled, lay down next to the panda, and went instantly to sleep.



TWO TIGERS

“I DON’T LIKE THIS JUNGLE,” SAID ROLLAN. “GIVE ME A CITY anytime.”

“Really?” asked Abeke in surprise. “I prefer my home, of course. It is not so wet and misty. But it is still better here than in any city. Uraza likes it too.”

It was two days since they had escaped Xin Kao Dai. The small party was now sitting in the bow of a slow but comfortable river barge, under a gauzy awning that protected them from the sun, from the teeming insects of the jungle all around the canal, and from prying eyes. Briggan sat next to Conor. The blue-eyed wolf watched the jungle riverbank with suspicion, while Uraza lay sprawled half across Abeke’s lap and half across a bale of some kind of spice, one of many piled high on the barge’s deck. Essix, of course, was somewhere aloft.

“I’ll be happy to get off this boat, though,” added Abeke. “I have been too much on boats.”

“The *Tellun’s Pride* was all right,” said Rollan. “A lot more comfortable than I expected.”

“I was on a ship before that,” said Abeke. “When I left my home.”

“With the enemy . . .” Conor started to say.

“Yes,” said Abeke quietly. “Though I didn’t know it.”

Briggan shifted at Conor’s side, his ears pricking up. Uraza lifted her head too, and sniffed the air. Up above, Essix called, a cry that was not her normal hunting whistle.

The three straightened up and looked ahead. The barge was heading for a point where the river narrowed for a stretch, and there were islands of matted reeds, some of them big enough to conceal bandits or river-pirate boats.

Abeke reached for her bow, quickly strung it, and nocked an arrow. Conor picked up his ax, and Rollan drew his knife with one hand and pulled back the gauze curtains with the other.

“I can’t see any trouble,” said Abeke, scanning the heavily vegetated riverbanks.

Conor walked back between two of the bales stacked on the deck and called down into the cabin.

“Tarik!”

There were two crewmen some sixty feet back at the stern of the barge, but they didn’t look alarmed. One was trimming the large, single sail, hauling on the main sheet, while the other held the massive tiller.

Briggan growled and stood stiff-legged, responding to some unseen, scented threat. Uraza jumped up onto the bale right at the bow and stared off toward the jungle bank, her tail twitching.

“What is it?” asked Abeke, sensing the unease of her spirit animal. It felt like all the hairs on her arms and neck were standing on end.

“Essix is definitely picking up something weird,” said Rollan. “I don’t know what, though.”

“Could there be an enemy in those reeds?” asked Conor anxiously. Abeke looked where he was pointing. The barge was going to pass very close to an island of swaying river plants, where attackers could easily be hiding.

“Of course there could be,” said Rollan. He kept pulling back the gauze curtains, disturbing the biting insects that had clustered against the gauze.

Suddenly the reeds parted. There was a deafening yowl, the flash of movement — and a huge tiger leaped onto the barge. A black tiger, with charcoal-colored fur marked with midnight stripes.

It landed on the spice bales and lunged down at Abeke’s head. She jumped back, dropping her bow. Uraza leaped to her defense, even though the leopard was much smaller than the tiger. They slashed at each other, jumping from bale to bale, with Briggan following on the deck, lunging at the tiger’s tail. Essix hovered overhead, wings beating the air furiously, her screech adding to the cacophony.

Rollan and Conor stood on opposite sides of the barge, weapons ready. The combat was so fast and furious that they didn’t dare join in. The two big cats moved quickly across the bales, yowling ferociously with every bite and scratch. Most of these failed to connect until Uraza suddenly landed a blow on the tiger’s ear, her claws tearing a deep notch.

Abeke cheered the leopard on, but her cheers turned to a sudden gasp as Uraza failed to entirely twist out of the way of a vicious swipe. Five trails of blood sprang up on her flank, the mark of the tiger’s claw.

Briggan howled furiously from the deck, unable to join the combat that danced about on top of the bales.

Abeke grabbed her bow, nocked an arrow, and drew it. But even with her quickness, she couldn't get a clear shot. She was joined a moment later by Tarik, who came rampaging out of the cabin, sword in hand.

"It's a spirit animal," he said. "Maddened beyond reason!"

"We have to help Uraza!" Abeke shouted at him. The tiger was much bigger and stronger than the leopard, though Uraza was slightly faster.

The tiger's jaws snapped at Uraza's throat. Only a wild roll saved her.

"A net!" said Conor. "The fishing net. I'll get it!"

He ran down the side of the barge, narrowly avoiding a spice bale that fell off the top of the stack, dislodged by the squalling big cats. The crew had nets with long handles they used to scoop up fish every now and then. If he could get one, it might hold the tiger long enough to tie it up, or kill it if necessary.

But before Conor reached the net, there was another roar from the reeds and a *white* tiger leaped right over the heads of the Greencloaks, straight into the combat.

"No!" shrieked Abeke, thinking that Uraza would have no chance against two huge tigers. She frantically shifted her aim, trying to get a clear shot, before lowering her bow in amazement.

The white tiger had placed itself between Uraza and the black tiger, and was *helping* Uraza. Its paws batted at the black tiger's head, and when the black tiger tried to get past it, the white tiger butted it firmly away, putting all of its considerable mass to the task. It was the black tiger's turn to stagger, and Abeke waited for the white tiger to lunge for its throat.

But the white tiger held back, and only then did she realize that its claws were sheathed and its mouth was closed. Instead of a fighting roar, it made a strange rumbling noise deep in its throat. Not a purr, but not exactly a growl either. Something she couldn't interpret.

Whatever the white tiger was doing, it worked. The black tiger retreated from Uraza, and then with a last throaty scream of defiance or madness, it jumped from the barge back to the reed island, only the tip of its raised tail visible as it raced into the jungle.

"What was that?" asked Rollan, staring wild-eyed.

"That was my brother's spirit animal," said a voice from the rear of the barge. "He has been driven mad with grief."

Abeke spun around, bringing her bow to bear on a woman now standing on the boat, boots dripping from the water. She was tall and slender, dressed in hunting leathers, with a green silk scarf tied around her neck and gray-flecked black hair tied back in a long plait. Her face was dark and weathered, but from age or long years in the open, Abeke couldn't tell. Perhaps both. A short Zhongese bow was on her back, and a curved sword at her side.

The woman raised her arm and cried, “Zhosur!” The white tiger jumped toward her and vanished in midair, to reappear as the tattoo of a leaping tiger on her forearm.

Abeke kept the bow trained carefully on her.

“Lishay!” said Tarik, pushing past Abeke with the biggest smile she had ever seen on him. He hurried over to her and clasped both her hands tightly in his. “It has been too long. What is this about your brother?”

Lishay’s eyes hooded in pain. Her hands twisted, gripped his in turn.

“Hanzan is dead,” she said. “Killed in a skirmish against the Conquerors ten days ago. You see what it has done to Zhamin. He is mad, and strikes out against any spirit animal, thinking them to be things created by the Bile.”

Tarik nodded somberly.

“It is a terrible thing, to lose one’s partner,” he said. “The madness of grief has taken many in such circumstances, human and spirit animal.”

“The Conquerors will pay,” said Lishay. “In blood.”

“Do not fear,” said Tarik in a calming voice, and his words were meant for Abeke and the others too. She lowered her bow, and Conor reassured Briggan with a hand in the furry ruff of his neck.

“We *will* defeat them,” Tarik said, stepping away from the woman, “but we will not do so alone. Let me introduce you to my companions, the children who have brought the Great Beasts back into the world.”

Some of Lishay’s anger ebbed as introductions were quickly made, but Abeke could see where Lishay’s fingernails had left red welts in Tarik’s hands.

“Only three,” Lishay said with a frown. “Where are the Zhongese noble girl and Jhi? They would be of great help here. Though Kho Kensit is only an outlying region of Zhong, the people revere Jhi. They would flock to our banners if we could show them the Great Panda.”

“Meilin went ahead of us, seeking a way to help the resistance more centrally in Zhong,” said Tarik. Conor looked at him with questioning eyes. This was the truth, Abeke supposed, but it certainly wasn’t the *whole* truth. “We don’t know where she is exactly, right now. My guess is that she will try to cross the Wall.”

“She’ll do it,” said Rollan. “She can really move and fight, that girl.”

“We hope she will do it,” said Conor. “I’m sorry, Lishay. It was my fault she left. If I hadn’t given away —”

“Enough,” said Abeke. Everyone who mattered knew what Conor had done and understood why he had done it. They needed to get past it, somehow. “We’re not here because of that, and neither is Lishay. Concentrate on getting the Slate Elephant. That’s what matters.”

“Yes,” mumbled Conor. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Stop being sorry!” she exclaimed, her usual calm breaking out of frustration. “We forgave you already, right, Rollan? Please stop apologizing!”

Conor opened his mouth to say something, probably sorry again, then shut it and nodded firmly.

Lishay was watching them closely, but she too said nothing. Abeke decided in that moment she liked the woman, for keeping silent when no more needed to be said.

“Abeke is correct,” Tarik said. “Reaching Dinesh and obtaining the Slate Elephant Talisman is our task. We must set our minds to it. Lishay — your message said you had located the elephant himself? What is our path?”

“It’s a bit complicated,” admitted Lishay. “I will explain things on the way. We’ll leave the river at dusk. There is a good landing spot a few miles ahead, so we will not have to risk wading, and attack from the snakeheads.”

“Snakeheads?”

“You’ve been warned not to trail your hands over the side? Not to go in the water?” asked Lishay. “It is because of the snakeheads. They are fish, as long as my arm, and with many sharp teeth.”

“They can’t jump, can they?” Conor asked.

“Fortunately not,” said Lishay. “We must prepare. What supplies did you bring?”

Rollan didn’t move.

“Tell us where we’re going, first,” he said. “What’s complicated?”

Abeke suddenly realized that Lishay had told them about the snakeheads to avoid answering what lay ahead. The Greencloak was holding something back, and Rollan, as per usual, had sensed her deception.

Lishay conceded.

“I am fairly certain that Dinesh is in Pharsit Nang, a small area within the lands of the Tergesh.”

“Who or what are the Tergesh?” asked Abeke.

“I’ve heard of them,” said Tarik. “They are a strange people, and very dangerous.”

“Will they allow us to search for Dinesh in their lands?” asked Conor.

“They move around a lot,” said Lishay. “If we’re lucky, we will be able to avoid them.”

“And if not?” asked Abeke.

“We will ask politely and hope for the best,” said Lishay.

It sounded like a joke, but she wasn’t smiling.

“I don’t understand,” said Rollan.

“The Tergesh is what they call themselves,” said Tarik in a grim voice. “To everyone else they are known as the rhino riders.”



THE JUNGLE PATH

LISHAY PROMISED THEM THAT THE JOURNEY FROM THE RIVER barge through the jungle would not be easy, and she was right. They traveled single file along a narrow trail through dense, wet undergrowth with overhanging trees and dangling vines that dropped leeches on everyone. Even when Essix spied a wider path nearby, Lishay would not let them move off the narrow trail she had chosen.

“The Tergesh ride the wider ways,” she said. “We are safer here.”

“I don’t get it,” said Rollan, pushing a broad, wet leaf away from his face. “Their spirit animals are rhinos?”

“No,” Lishay explained. “They do not bond with spirit animals, with or without Nectar. No one knows why. Possibly it is because as soon as they can stay on one, every Tergesh child is brought up with a rhino calf, living with it, training with it. . . .”

“Ouch!” Rollan said. “Sounds uncomfortable! But still, a rhino would be too big even for the path Essix can see. I saw one once, in a traveling fair, and it was huge.”

“Rhinos are big,” confirmed Abeke. “I have only ever seen them in the grasslands. Never in country as crowded with trees and vines as this.”

“The rhinos of Pharsit Nang are not the same as the Niloan rhino,” explained Lishay. “They are smaller, faster, and meaner, and they are extremely difficult to tame. Think about that. You have all seen wild horses, yes? Imagine a wild rhino, and what kind of rider it takes to master one. That is why we must avoid them by sticking to the narrow trails.”

“I’d be happier if we could avoid these biting insects!” complained Rollan, slapping his cheek. He looked at his hand, on which the crushed insect was smeared into a patch of his own blood. He hated the jungle. He even felt a bit sick, as if he might be coming down with something.

“There are fewer of the blood drinkers in the jungle, away from the river,” said Lishay. “But more leeches, and spiders, and stinging ants. Look in your boots each morning, and hang a hammock to sleep in.”

“I don’t know why they like me so much,” complained Rollan, slapping another one. “Go and bite Conor!”

“Your blood must taste better,” said Conor.

For once Rollan couldn’t think of something snappy in response, and it wasn’t just that he was surprised that Conor was finally snarking back. He felt his face where the insects had stung him. Was it his imagination, or was his cheek swelling up a bit?

“We will be able to go faster on a wider road,” said Abeke.

“It’s still too risky,” repeated Lishay. She paused to slash away some kind of creeper that had grown across the path.

“We’ve got Essix,” said Rollan. “She can see any rhinos coming along the path, and we can take cover.”

Essix and Zhosur were the only spirit animals currently out and about. All the others were in dormant form. Even Briggan, who was normally at his happiest in the wild, seemed suspicious of the jungle, perhaps because it was closed in and wet. And though Zhosur had seemed perfectly fine with Uraza, Abeke thought it might be wise to keep the leopard away from the tiger. Tarik’s Lumeo was also not keen on the jungle, or was possibly just lazy and wanted to ride. Otters could be like that.

“That’s true,” said Tarik. “Lishay, time is short. . . .”

“I think the risk is too high,” Lishay said. “But if you agree, I will bow to you and take the broader path.”

Everyone turned to Tarik, whose forehead was deeply wrinkled in thought.

“Very well, then,” said Tarik. “Let us take the easier, faster way. Rollan and Essix can watch for approaching rhino riders. We *must* get to Dinesh before the Conquerors.”

“How could they know where Dinesh is?” asked Lishay. “We’ve been searching for months, and only put all the clues together in these past three days.”

“The Conquerors also have a seer,” said Tarik. “Like Lenori. And their forces are moving deeper and deeper into Kho Kensit. And also . . . I’m becoming paranoid in my age. War has a way of playing on our anxieties.”

Lishay nodded. “Very well. We shall take the wider path.”

Zhosur made a low rumbling sound and headed off through the jungle, breaking from the path. Lishay followed, the others close behind. As they left the path, it started to rain again. It was warm rain, but still annoying. It trickled down under their sailor's coats, and got in their eyes, and just made everything more miserable.

"It's so hot," said Conor. "Hotter even than midsummer, back home. No good for sheep."

"No good for anyone except biting insects," said Rollan, slipping on some wet undergrowth and steadying himself by putting his hand out against a tree trunk.

"Are you all right?"

"I slipped," said Rollan irritably, shrugging Conor's hand off his elbow. "The heat's getting to me too. I'm just not cut out for jungles."



Their hike became easier once they got onto the wider trail. It was about eight feet wide, the undergrowth had been well trampled, and there were no annoying vines hanging down from the trees that clustered on either side, and so no sudden showers of leeches either. The rain also stopped and the sun came out, raising wafts of steam everywhere from the drying vegetation.

"This is better," said Abeke.

"It sure is," said Conor.

Rollan didn't say anything. He felt very tired, and could only nod his head in agreement. There was something he felt he should be doing, but he couldn't remember what it was. Something to do with Essix, who was flying around somewhere.

"Zhosur says there is a clearing up ahead," said Lishay. "Elephant grass, so no cover. We must cross it quickly. Come on."

She led the way again, at the practiced lope of a hunter, faster than a walk, with Zhosur ambling at her side. Abeke matched her stride, Conor behind her, less graceful but keeping up without difficulty. Rollan came behind, stumbling a little. Tarik brought up the rear, turning often to look behind. Lumeo had emerged from passive form and was now draped over Tarik's shoulder, the otter watching as carefully as the man.

"I think someone's following us," said Tarik quietly to the otter. "We had best keep a careful eye out."

Rollan looked behind him and almost slipped again. The air was misty, or was it something in his eyes? He could see nothing but crushed green foliage on the path behind them, and trees crowding in on all sides.

The clearing they reached was as large as Concorba's Central Market Square back home. Saplings and ferns grew in around the edges, like eager children watching from the outskirts of a game. But the rest of it was the spiky elephant grass Lishay had mentioned. Most of it was waist-high, but some bigger clumps were taller even than Tarik. It didn't look much like real grass to Rollan. It grew too high and had blades like long swords.

Lishay stopped where the jungle began to thin out and looked ahead. Zhosur prowled around, sniffing at the ground, his tail quivering.

"He smells rhinos," said Lishay quietly. "But it may not be recent. What does Essix see, Rollan?"

"Uh, what?" asked Rollan. He tried to concentrate, but he just felt . . . foggy. He couldn't think clearly.

"Where's Essix, Rollan?" asked Abeke. "What can she see?"

Rollan looked up at the sky. He couldn't feel Essix anywhere nearby, and her sense-impressions were vague.

"I'm not sure," he muttered. He wiped his sweaty forehead and blinked. The taste of bird flesh and the crunch of tiny bones filled his mouth. "I think she's eating. But if there was anything, she'd warn us, I'm sure of it."

"Our path continues over there," said Lishay, pointing to the far side of the clearing. "Between those two great trees. But two other trails come in, one on each side. Keep a careful lookout. We must cross as quickly as we can, all together at a run. Is everyone ready?"

The group all nodded. No one noticed that Rollan's nod continued almost to his chest. He jerked back as his chin hit his neck, and wiped more sweat off his forehead. Surely he couldn't be as tired as he felt, he thought. It was just the heat, and once he got out in the clearing there would be more air.

"Zhosur will lead," said Lishay. "Let's go!"

The tiger bounded out into the clearing, with Lishay and Abeke right behind him. Conor was next, with Rollan close behind. Tarik once again came last, staying a good distance behind the others, acting as rear guard.

They were halfway across when Zhosur stopped and roared. It was not like the lion's roar that Abeke had described, but rather a series of connected, throaty snarls. With the tiger's roar, there was sudden movement in the tall tufts of grass all around them.

Small rhinos stood up from where they had been lying in the long grass, hidden from sight. Their riders, short but wiry men and women, leaped onto the rhinos' backs, riding without saddles or reins. They wore cotton robes that crossed across their chest, leaving their forearms and feet free. All of them had long knives at their belts, and either a lance or a long bamboo blowpipe.

The rhinos themselves were as Lishay had described them. Smaller than the Niloan variety, with sharper horns and smart, vibrant black eyes.

There were rhino riders everywhere, at least sixty of them, too many to fight. Escape was the only option. But they were surrounded!

Tarik was the first to move. He was the closest to the riders, and he had Lumeo to help him. He twisted on the spot, ran at the rider behind him, threw Lumeo in the air, and slid under the startled rhino's legs as it thrust its horn up in an attempt to gore the flying otter. Emerging out the other side, Tarik caught Lumeo and slapped the rhino hard on the rump, surprising it so much it staggered away.

"Follow me!" he called to the others. "Hurry!"

The others responded as quickly as they could. Conor called Briggan, and Uraza sprang snarling from Abeke's arm, but the rhino riders were advancing, blowpipes at their mouths. Dozens of tiny darts flew across the clearing. Aided by their spirit animals, the Greencloaks danced, and jumped, and ducked through the storm of darts, trying to keep together, to break past the ever-shifting rhinos and reach Tarik, where he stood just outside the circle, unable to help them.

But Rollan wasn't running with them. He felt really sick now, unable to work out what was going on. One of the small darts struck him on the cheek, just like the biting insects that loved him so much. Rollan pulled it out and looked at it, wondering why they bothered to shoot such tiny, ineffective darts. The point of it was smeared with a dark, sticky material. Rollan stared at it, but he didn't figure out what it was until he heard Lishay shouting, as if from far away.

"Poison! Ware poison on the darts! Don't let them strike your skin!"

But the air was thick with them. Not even Lishay could avoid them. The last thing Rollan saw as the strength rushed out of his limbs and he fell to the ground was Tarik sprinting toward the jungle, much faster than any normal man could run, with several rhino riders crashing after him.



UNEXPECTED REUNION

“**H**OW DO YOU KNOW YOUR WAY THROUGH THE MAZE?” Meilin asked Xue as the old woman unhesitatingly chose to go left at the next intersection of paths. Her pack was so tall that from behind she looked like a mass of pots and pans with legs, but each bit of metal was carefully tied and separated, so that they made hardly any noise.

“Practice,” replied Xue shortly.

“When will we get to the South Fort?” asked Meilin.

“Later,” said Xue.

Meilin opened her mouth to ask for a more detailed response, then shut it. She had already learned that if Xue didn't want to talk, she wouldn't. The girl stopped to look behind her, to make sure Jhi was keeping up and hadn't stopped to eat bamboo shoots. The panda was about thirty yards behind but at least she was ambling along. A few rats ran across in front of her, some of the many that thronged among the bamboo, eating the fallen flowers.

From somewhere ahead came the sound of axes on bamboo.

Meilin whirled around. Xue had stopped. She was standing completely still, listening.

More axes joined, the single chopping boom multiplying. There were many axes at work, not too far away, accompanied by the sound of bamboo falling.

“Someone's cutting the bamboo,” said Meilin, instantly thinking of the Conquerors.

“We will go see,” Xue said. “If we are separated, Jhi knows the way to the South Fort.”

“Jhi knows the way?” asked Meilin.

“I told her while you slept.” Xue shrugged off her huge pack and carefully slid it into the bamboo so that it was hidden from sight. Once again Meilin was impressed with how easily she moved for such an old lady. “Be quiet now. We must sneak up and look.”

“It can’t be the loyalists you spoke of,” said Meilin quietly as they walked toward the noise, thinking of her father. “Only servants of the Devourer would attack the Maze.”

Xue nodded and held her finger against her lips for silence. The sound of the chopping was getting much louder, loud enough to drown out any noise they might make, thought Meilin, but she obeyed anyway. She looked around again, and was surprised to see Jhi had caught up with them and was only a few steps behind. She didn’t know the panda could move so quickly.

They all stopped a few yards short of the next intersection. The sound of chopping was really loud, interspersed with occasional shouts and orders. There had to be hundreds of people at work, and they were close. Xue and Meilin crept forward slowly.

The path only went for a dozen yards or so before it opened out into a great highway that was being cut through the Maze. There was a line of ax wielders stretching far into the distance, all busily chopping away. Other workers were dragging the fallen bamboo back to huge piles that were probably going to be burned.

Behind the line of workers, there were soldiers, many of them with spirit animals. Like the attackers at Jano Rion, they did not wear uniforms, but Meilin had no doubt who they were. They carried whips as well as their weapons, and used them whenever the workers slowed down.

“If you cannot think through something, you destroy it,” said Xue. “That is the way of the Devourer. We must —”

She stopped in mid-sentence. The supersharp chopsticks Meilin had seen the night before suddenly appeared in the old woman’s hands, and she lunged up into the air above Meilin’s shoulder. There was a scream, and a hooded, masked figure dressed entirely in the yellow-green of the bamboo fell to the ground.

Meilin whirled around, her staff raised just in time to counter a vicious strike from the dagger of another camouflaged attacker. She knocked the weapon aside and followed it up with a blow to the collarbone that made the assassin drop the dagger and howl in pain, her arm hanging limp and useless.

But more assassins were jumping down to the path. Meilin backed up, her eyes flickering across them and up into the bamboo, noting the iron spikes driven into the stalks. These enemies had been lurking up there, standing on the spikes, ready to jump down on anyone passing underneath. A series of piercing whistles echoed through the bamboo forest, raising the alarm.

“We must go,” said Xue, pointing with her bloodstained chopstick to the right-hand path. Two assassins had dropped there, and there were more above. “Now!”

She charged forward, Meilin at her side. There was a blur of chopsticks and staff, and the two blocking assassins fell wounded to either side. Their companions above were too slow, dropping behind the old woman and the girl.

But Jhi had been left behind, and now there were half a dozen assassins between Meilin and the panda.

“Jhi!” shouted Meilin, raising her arm. She might be too far away, but if Jhi could assume the dormant state, then they could flee. There was a chance. . . .

Jhi didn’t return to her. Instead the panda calmly reached up and uprooted one of the shorter bamboo stalks, grunting as she lifted the massive thirty-foot-long stalk completely out of the ground. Gripping it clumsily between her paws, she let it fall straight down the path, toward the heads of the assassins. They jumped aside, the huge length of bamboo bouncing off the ground.

Jhi did not let go. She shook the bamboo, sweeping the path from side to side, catching the assassins’ legs and sending them toppling. When the last of them was groaning on the ground, the panda dropped the bamboo and sauntered along toward Meilin, who was staring openmouthed at her companion.

But she did not have much time to marvel. The guards from the clearing operation had heard the whistled alarms, and a score or more were running toward them with spirit animals outpacing them in front. Meilin noticed one in particular, an ibex with large backswept horns. She was sure she had seen it at the fall of Jano Rion.

“We must run,” said Xue.

“We need to slow them down,” said Meilin. She looked at Jhi, new admiration for the panda filling her mind.

“Jhi, can you block the path? With bamboo?”

Jhi responded by pulling down a long bamboo stalk across the path, and then another, and then a third, weaving it through the first two in a display of both great strength and precision. In just a few minutes, she added half a dozen more, blocking the path completely.

“Now we run,” said Meilin. Jhi made a kind of bleating noise.

“Lazy,” said Xue.

Meilin looked puzzled, then laughed and raised her arm. Jhi disappeared, and the panda tattoo appeared on Meilin’s hand.

They ran for a surprisingly long time, Xue choosing the turnings with total confidence. Eventually, the sounds of pursuit and cracking bamboo were left far behind them. After a while, Meilin started to

hope that Xue would stop for a rest, because she was out of breath herself. Surely an old woman couldn't run so far?

Finally Xue slowed and began to walk.

“Soon you'll come to the South Fort, a left and a right and then straight ahead,” she said. “I will leave you now.”

“Leave me?” asked Meilin, surprised. “Where will you go?”

“Back for my pack,” said Xue.

“Back? But the enemy is there!”

“I will go around them,” said Xue, as if this was as easy in the Maze as anywhere.

“Oh,” said Meilin. “I was hoping you might . . . might come with me. With us. I've seen you fight. I know I could learn from you, and you could help the loyalists against the Conquerors.”

“I have my own business,” said Xue. “You fight well too, considering. With practice, one day you might be worth teaching.”

Meilin blinked. She was used to being told she was a great student, the best fighter of her age. But she bit back a hurt retort. There was something about the old woman that demanded respect, beyond her fighting ability with sharpened chopsticks, her astonishing endurance and nimbleness. . . .

Suddenly Meilin added two and two.

“Are you one of the Marked?” she asked.

Xue smiled, showing several missing teeth. She opened the top of her silk blouse to reveal a secret pocket. A white jumping mouse blinked up at Meilin, its eyes miniature versions of the old woman's, dark and penetrating and mischievous.

“Zap,” she said. The mouse vanished, even as Xue rolled up her sleeve to show the tattoo of a leaping mouse on her forearm.

“Good fortune, Meilin and Jhi. Perhaps we will meet again one day.”

Meilin bowed her head. When she looked up, Xue was gone.



The South Fort was half a mile farther along the path, past several intersections. Though still inside the Maze, it was built in a small, shallow valley where many paths met. Meilin came out of the shadow of the bamboo and looked out across the open expanse of bare earth, down to the cluster of huts behind a wooden palisade below. Though there was bamboo forest all around the valley, she still felt cheered to be out of the Maze, at least for now.

“Halt!”

Three soldiers in the crimson-lacquered armor of the regular Zhongese army hurried up toward her. One of them wore the braided armband of a corporal.

“I am Meilin, daughter of —” Meilin started to say, but her words were drowned out by the sudden bark of the corporal.

“Drop your staff and kneel!”

“I will not!” said Meilin. “Escort me to whoever is in command here.”

The corporal scowled and drew his sword. A moment later the other two drew their swords as well.

“Our orders are to kill anyone who comes out of the Maze who is not in uniform,” he said. “So we will kill you.”

“Don’t be stupid!” said Meilin, though as she looked at the man’s piggish eyes she realized he probably *was* extremely stupid. “Call an officer at once!”

“No peasant out of the bamboo tells me what to do!” roared the corporal. “Kneel down!”

“Corporal, maybe we’d better —” said one of the soldiers, who looked considerably smarter than his superior.

“Shut up!” roared the corporal. He raised his sword. “Intruder, kneel for execution.”

“It really would be best to call your officer,” sighed Meilin. She raised her own staff. The moves she needed to knock down the three soldiers were already flitting through her head. She knew exactly what to do.

But she didn’t attack. Even a few days before, she would have angrily knocked them down and stormed over to the fort to complain to whoever was in charge. But now she kept her anger in check and stood there patiently, just as she had waited patiently with Jhi as night fell in the Maze, for the sound of Xue cooking dinner to become apparent to her. Sometimes patience was the best strategy.

The corporal didn’t keep his anger in check. He rushed at her, slashing with his sword. Meilin swayed aside and just slid her staff between his legs so that he stumbled past her and fell over, dropping his sword. He crawled after it, shouting at the others.

“Attack! What are you waiting for?”

The two soldiers looked at each other.

“Attack!” croaked the corporal, from the ground.

The smart-looking soldier sheathed his sword and took a horn from his belt. He blew two sharp blasts from it, the sound echoing across the small valley. A few seconds later, there was an answering pair of blasts from the fort below.

“A patrol will come now,” he said. “With an officer. What did you say your name was?”

“Meilin, daughter of General Teng.”

The two soldiers exchanged a horrified look, and the corporal on the ground groaned.

“Who is in charge here?” asked Meilin.

The soldiers braced to attention. The corporal staggered up, but only in order to bow low before her.

“The exalted general,” blurted the clever soldier.

“General *who?*” she asked, telling herself not to hope.

“Teng, of course. Your father.”

Relief ripped through Meilin. He had escaped from Jano Rion after all! He was alive! “Take me to him — immediately!”

“You’re really his —” stammered the corporal. “That is, you are really —”

“This way, mistress,” said the clever soldier as the patrol appeared, jogging toward them. Once again he had shown he was much quicker on the uptake than his superior. “We will be honored to provide you with a personal escort.”

Meilin followed him, feeling a warm rush of happiness. Everything would be all right now that she knew her father was alive. They would soon be together again, and side by side they would fight to wrest Zhong from the clutches of the Conquerors.

With the realization of who she was, everything moved quickly, but not quickly enough for Meilin, who had waited long, hard days for this moment. The loyalist soldiers escorted her into the fort, and she was saluted at the gate to the palisade. Her father was standing on the parade ground, tall in his silver-and-crimson armor, and her eyes pricked with tears on seeing him. It was all she could do not to run to him and throw herself into his arms. But such an open display of affection would shame him in front of his officers. He was standing with several high-ranking loyalists that Meilin knew. He looked tired, she thought, and somehow not quite as tall as she remembered. His uniform was torn, its brilliant insignia gone. From a distance, she might not have recognized him at all.

“Exalted General,” said the soldier, falling back out of respect.

Teng turned and caught sight of Meilin, and his eyes widened in shock.

“Meilin!”

“Father.”

She stopped three paces from him and bowed low before him.

His footsteps approached. Two muddy boots came into view. Strong hands gripped her shoulders and raised her to an upright position.

Their brown eyes locked, and in them she saw love and worry in equal measures. And . . . were those *tears* she saw on the brink of falling? Impossible!

For a giddy moment, she thought that *he* might actually embrace *her*.

Then he stepped back, letting her go and allowing his hands to fall to his sides.

“So, you are here,” he said. “Why? Are you alone?”

There was a slight tone of rebuke in his voice, which she thought she must surely be misinterpreting.

“I left the Greencloaks, Father, to come back to fight for Zhong,” she said. “You should know that a large force of Conquerors is cutting a way through the Maze.”

General Teng nodded slowly.

“Your spirit animal, Jhi, is still with you?”

Meilin showed the tattoo on her arm.

“You have learned to work with her, use her powers?”

“I am beginning to learn, Father.”

“Good,” said General Teng. “We will take tea, and I will hear of your activities. There are . . . things I must tell you too.”

“But the Conquerors, Father.” She couldn’t read him. Why wasn’t he worried about the nearness of the enemy? “They are several miles distant, but there is a great host. Hundreds of soldiers at least, forcing many more workers to cut the bamboo.”

“It will take them at least a week to cut even a mile through the Maze. General Chin . . . ?”

Her father’s closest aide and friend stepped up beside them and nodded at Meilin in recognition. Chin’s uniform was worn and didn’t appear to have been washed for days. Meilin was relieved to see that he had survived the invasion as well, but if he was relieved to see her in return, he didn’t show it.

“Shall I give the order to move out, sir?” he asked General Teng.

“Not yet, but begin preparations, and double the guards on the upper paths,” ordered her father. “Is there any chance you were followed through the Maze, Meilin?”

“I’m certain I was not,” she said. “We had to fight camouflaged assassins near the cutting, but we got away.”

“We?” asked General Teng.

“A woman named Xue helped me,” said Meilin. “One of the Marked. I think she used to be a Greencloak. Maybe long ago. She’s old, but still strong.”

“We know Xue,” said General Teng. “She is true to Zhong and a friend of our cause. I’m pleased that she helped you, although somewhat surprised. Come, let’s drink tea and we will talk.”

“What is there to talk about, Father?” she said. “I’ve come to fight with you, in your army. Tell me what to do and I will do it.”

“Meilin, it is not so simple —”

“It is *perfectly* simple.”

“Meilin, enough! Remember who you are.”

The rebuke was as startling as a slap. Meilin felt her cheeks grow warm. She knew exactly who she was and what she had traveled so far to do. If he was going to tell her that she was too precious and noble to fight with him against the Conquerors, then he would *really* have a fight on his hands.

Before she could say anything, horn blasts came from higher up the valley, near where Meilin had emerged from the Maze. Four sharp blasts in a row. She knew that signal. It was an alarm, not a call for a patrol.

General Chin let out a gasp of surprise.

“We’ve been discovered!” snapped General Teng. “To arms, all warriors!”

Gongs took up the alarm, their deep warning chimes echoing through the treetops. Soldiers ran out from the barracks buildings, forming up in ranks.

Teng turned to General Chin. “Take Meilin to the eastern entrance and instruct her on how to reach Pharsit Nang. We’ll hold here for as long as possible, then rendezvous with you at the Southeast Supply Camp. Make certain my daughter does not turn back when she leaves you.”

“Father, I won’t go! Not again!” exclaimed Meilin. “I am a warrior, and I will fight! For Zhong!”

General Teng shook his head firmly.

“You *are* a warrior, yes, but you are a Greencloak too. That is where your duty lies.”

“No, Father, it lies with you.”

A second time he gripped her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. “*No*, Meilin. We have received word that there are Greencloaks in Pharsit Nang. You must find them and rejoin them. You should never have left them. Chin will tell you how to get there. Go now!”

Meilin stared at him, unwilling to accept what he was saying, not caring if he or anyone else saw her tears. How could he send her off again just like that? She didn’t want to rejoin the Greencloaks. She didn’t believe they could properly resist the Conquerors. Only Zhong, the true Zhong, had the strength to do that.

“Father, I came all this way —”

“Do not argue with me! The Four Fallen are meant to be together, I am sure of this. My hope lies with you, with *them*.” He lowered his voice. “And you are not safe among us.”

“What . . . what do you mean?”

“The enemy has found us too swiftly for it to be an accident.” General Teng was almost whispering now, making sure she and she alone heard him over the sound of soldiers preparing for battle. “There is treachery here . . . or something more sinister. Either way, they want you and Jhi, and I will not let them have you. You will obey me, Meilin. Go now, and go swiftly!”

Meilin stepped away from him, shocked to the core by everything he had told her. Treachery! Among the loyalists! She could barely credit it. But she had to believe him, and she had to accept that what he asked her to do he did in good faith, not because he thought her weak. . . .

“Meilin, you still stand before me! I beg you to go! How can you *still* not see what must be done?”

His words were so harsh, his disbelief so strong. Meilin felt suddenly cold, despite the heat, as if she had been drenched with ice-cold water.

Maybe Jhi *was* meant to be with Essix, Briggan, and Uraza, and that meant Meilin was too. She had left the others in anger—just as Finn had warned her not to before their journey to Eura—a blind anger that had sent her off to seek what she wanted, not what was best. . . .

She blinked back tears. To find her father, and then to be sent away from him again . . . There was a pain in her heart that felt agonizing, but she had to bear it. He was *beseeking* her, not just ordering her. It was as though he was treating her as an equal, an obstinate equal who could not be made to understand something fundamental.

“Yes, Father,” she whispered. “I will go at once.”

“As you should,” he said in a tone she was more familiar with. When she straightened, she thought she caught a hint of a smile behind his stern expression. A sad smile, but it was there.

“General Chin, I’m ready,” she said, half turning to address the words to her father’s old friend. “Farewell, Father.”

“Farewell, Meilin.”

They turned away from each other at the same time. General Teng moved quickly to join the soldiers, who were already marching out through the fort’s gates. Meilin was hustled in the opposite direction by General Chin, who kept looking over his shoulder, back up the valley.

Meilin looked too, feeling as though a large part of her heart was being left behind with every step.

The battle had already begun. A small group of loyalist soldiers stood shield to shield in the narrow exit from the Maze. But for every enemy they slew, another three hurled themselves against the shield wall, and there were bowmen climbing the bamboo with iron spikes like the assassins who had attempted to waylay Meilin. Within minutes they would be in position, ready to rain arrows down upon the defenders.

Only the narrowness of the path and the bravery of the loyalist soldiers were holding the invaders back. Meilin could hear the shouts and screams and the clash of steel on steel drifting down on the wind. But the defenders could not last, even with her father and his soldiers racing to reinforce them.

“If we’re lucky, they will hold till nightfall and can escape under the cover of darkness,” said Chin. “I just don’t understand how the Conquerors found the way through the Maze so quickly!”

“They didn’t follow me,” said Meilin defensively. “I’m sure of it! Maybe they’ve got bird spirit animals, like Essix, and they mapped the Maze from above.”

“We shoot all birds,” said Chin, and then shook his head, as though dismissing a troublesome thought. “Come. It’s two days’ hard walking to Pharsit Nang. We must get you away quickly so I can join the fight. I will tell you the turns through the Maze. Listen carefully!”



SUNSET DEATH

ABEKE WOKE UP WITH A POUNDING HEADACHE. SHE WAS thirsty and her belly was empty. The sun glared down at her through a gap in clouds that looked fat and heavy, likely to dump a load of rain at any time. She was on her side in very tall grass, unable to move her arms and legs. For a long moment, she couldn't remember what happened. Her limbs appeared to be tied. But how . . . ? Why . . . ?

When she remembered, she groaned more out of dismay than actual pain. There had been too many darts. Even aided by their spirit animals, the Greencloaks could not avoid all of them. Eventually, the darts found unprotected skin, and the poison wound its way into their blood.

Rollan had gone down first, then Conor, both boys dropping heavily onto their backs, limbs splayed. Lishay had rushed to stand with Abeke, but she had been cut down mid-step. First her eyes had rolled back into her skull, then her legs had folded underneath her, and finally she had fallen face-forward to the ground.

Abeke had still worn the Granite Ram, and she used it to attempt a wild leap away. But even as she had passed over the wall of rhinos, a dart had hit the side of her neck. Uraza had yowled somewhere behind her. The world had contracted around her, fading into darkness first at the edges of her vision, then closing in around her, as though she was seeing through a long black tunnel. With the last of her strength she called the leopard back into her tattoo. Uraza could not be harmed there, and might be able to help her when she woke up.

If she woke up . . .

Blinking up at the sky an unknown time later, she told herself to be grateful she was alive, even if she didn't know what she was going to do now. Her hands were tied with a leather cord. The bindings hobbling her ankles had the roughness of rope.

She rolled over and found that Conor and Lishay were lying next to her. Both were awake, and both tied like her. Beyond Lishay, Rollan was lying flat on his back. He was not tied up, but he wasn't moving. He looked very pale, very sick, or even possibly . . .

“Rollan!”

“He's alive,” said Conor in response to her gasp. “But he must be very sick. I'm worried about him.”

“He was looking a bit ill before,” said Lishay. “Or perhaps he has suffered a reaction to the poison.”

“We have to help him,” Abeke said, sitting up and inching awkwardly across the ground to try to get closer to him. “Any sign of Tarik?”

“None at all,” said Conor.

“We won't see him,” said Lishay softly, “until he wants to be seen.”

Abeke looked around. The elephant grass was too tall to make out anything of their surroundings, apart from the tops of the usual jungle trees, some distance away.

“Is this the same clearing?”

“No,” said Lishay. “We've been moved. We must have been carried here.”

“What if they trade us to the Conquerors for some kind of advantage?” Abeke said.

“That is not the riders' way,” said Lishay gloomily. “We must face whatever justice they choose to mete out. There's usually a task or trial that we must complete, a very difficult one, in order to prove our innocence. If we can't, they will kill us. Somehow we must prevail.”

“But we haven't done anything wrong,” said Conor.

“If they were going to kill us,” said Abeke, “they would have done it already.”

“It's hard to tell,” said Lishay. “I think we have been unconscious for two nights.”

Abeke shook her head in shock. Two nights! No wonder she felt so parched . . .

“Bring the prisoners!”

The shout startled the Greencloaks. It was followed by the tramp of feet as half a dozen rhino riders came through the grass. Three of them helped Lishay, Abeke, and Conor up, not very gently. The other three picked up Rollan, who hung limply in their hold, head lolling from side to side.

The clearing was much larger than where they had been captured. Right in the middle, sticking out of the elephant grass, was a tall rock that had been laboriously shaped to resemble a rhino. A heavily

bearded man stood on the rock, dressed in the robe and turban of a rhino rider, but with a golden curved rhino horn on a chain around his neck.

Abeke looked at him and then glanced around. There were ranks and ranks of rhino riders behind her. Hundreds of them lined up, riders and rhinos watching the man on the rock, and the prisoners being herded over to him.

“I am Jodoboda!” said the man as Abeke and the others stood before the rock. “Leader of the Tergesh, who you call rhino riders. Speak your names, and hear your doom!”

“I am Lishay, a Greencloak,” said Lishay. “We come to — ”

“Speak only your names!” roared Jodoboda.

“I am Abeke,” said Abeke proudly. “Of Okaihee.”

“I am Conor,” said Conor. “Of nowhere in particular.”

“And your companion?”

“He is Rollan,” said Lishay. “He is sick, he needs —”

“Quiet!” roared Jodoboda. “From now on only one of you may speak. I choose . . . you!”

He pointed at Conor. The boy gulped and looked at Lishay, who nodded her head slightly in encouragement.

“Um, we are Greencloaks,” said Conor in a hesitant voice. “We don’t mean you . . . the rhino riders any harm. We just need to find Dinesh the Elephant.”

“We are the Tergesh. Did you know these lands were our lands?”

“Uh, yes, but we hoped we might . . . er . . . sneak across,” said Conor.

Abeke tightly clenched her bound fists, but kept her face carefully impassive. She didn’t want Jodoboda to see anything other than strength in her. Perhaps that would make up for the mess Conor was making.

“We’re in a hurry, you see,” Conor went on. “Because the Conquerors, the servants of the Devourer . . . They also want to find Dinesh. They’re invading Kho Kensit, and they’ve already taken over Xin Kao Dai.”

“We know this,” said Jodoboda. “It is a small point in your favor that you are *not* Conquerors.”

“So if it’s all right with you,” Conor continued, “we’d like permission to keep going, to find Dinesh. And we need help for Rollan. He’s obviously sick. . . .”

“The Tergesh do not allow trespassers to travel in our lands unchecked,” said Jodoboda. “We cannot allow you to wander aimlessly in your quest for Dinesh.”

“Do you know where he is?” blurted out Conor.

“We know,” said Jodoboda. “But why should I tell you? Why should I help you in any way?”

“You will help us because a child is dying and the Tergesh are honorable people, not monsters!”

The crowd of rhino riders stirred. The voice had come from among their ranks.

Jodoboda blinked. His thick whiskers bristled.

“Who said that?” he bellowed. “Come forward at once!”

One turbaned figure stepped through the crowd to face the man on the rhino-shaped rock. He was robed from head to foot, and as he stepped free of the riders and joined the prisoners, he tossed his turban aside.

Lishay’s face lit up.

“Tarik!” Conor cried. “How did you find us?”

The fierce shriek of a falcon came from above as Essix plummeted down and swooped over his head, circling once around the clearing. With claws extended, she landed in the grass next to Rollan and stalked over to perch on the unconscious boy’s chest.

“What is this?” spluttered Jodoboda. He gestured with both hands, and the circle of riders closed in.

Abeke’s relief on seeing Tarik was tempered by the fact that now all of them were surrounded by rhino riders.

“We mean no disrespect,” Tarik said with a low bow. “Neither do we wish you any harm. Let us pass and we guarantee no harm will come to you.”

“No *harm*? To *me*?” Jodoboda tipped back his head and laughed uproariously as though that was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

His laughter choked into silence as a slight figure rose up behind him, and pressed a knife against his throat.

“As my friend says,” Meilin told him, “we offer our guarantee.”

Abeke felt her eyes bulge in surprise.

“Meilin!” cried Conor. “What —? How —?”

“You mean no disrespect, you say?” asked Jodoboda in a quiet voice. He seemed surprisingly calm with Meilin’s knife at his throat. “But you are standing on the Rock of the People, which is the opposite of respectful. Climb down, and we will talk.”

Meilin hesitated, and for the first time caught sight of Rollan on the ground. Her eyes narrowed and her knife moved close enough to Jodoboda’s neck to give him a shave.

“What have you done to Rollan?” she cried.

“Nothing!” called out Abeke, her voice calm. “He’s sick. The rhino riders didn’t hurt him. Let’s all talk peacefully.”

Meilin looked at Tarik, who nodded. She hesitated, then slowly put away her knife.

“You see we mean no harm,” said Tarik as Meilin climbed down and quickly knelt by Rollan’s side, gingerly feeling his forehead with the back of her hand. She looked up at Conor and Abeke. Conor gave her a small wave and Abeke nodded, but that was the extent of their reunion. Proper welcomes and explanations would have to wait until later.

“I do see that now,” said Jodoboda, lightly rubbing his throat. “For this, and other reasons, I have decided that we will help you.”

“You’ll take us to Dinesh and make Rollan well again?” asked Conor.

“No. By ancient custom, we cannot do either of these things, not yet. First, you must complete a task of my choosing. By completing it you will earn the things you ask for.”

“This is your way of helping?” asked Meilin, her hand going back to the hilt of her knife.

“What task?” asked Conor with an audible swallow.

Jodoboda fingered his beard, deep-set eyes lingering on Rollan. The boy was very pale, and there were mottled patches of red on his face.

“You must bring me four banana gourds from the deep swamp,” he said. “One for each of the Fallen.”

“Banana gourds?” asked Conor. “Uh, is that all?”

“‘All’? Do you think this task unworthy?”

“You’re mocking us!” said Meilin.

“I assure you that I am deadly serious,” said Jodoboda sternly. “Your friend has the Sunset Death. The cure is made from the seeds of the banana gourd. If he does not have it before nightfall tomorrow, he will die.”

Everyone looked at Rollan. The red blotches on his face were the color of sunset. There were small beads of sweat all over his skin as well, and his breathing was very shallow.

“He’s dying?” asked Meilin anxiously. “We must go to the deep swamp at once!”

“Not all of us, I think,” said Tarik. “Can Jhi help him? Her healing . . .”

“Oh, of course,” said Meilin. There was a bright flash and the panda appeared. Jhi looked down at Rollan, gave a sigh, and began to lick his head. The boy groaned and moved, the first time he had done so since they’d been watching.

“How could you let him get so sick?” asked Meilin, looking up at the others.

“We . . . I . . . didn’t notice,” said Abeke quietly, feeling shame in the face of Meilin’s accusation. “He didn’t say anything.”

“I should have noticed,” said Lishay and Tarik at the same time.

“Jhi is helping him,” said Abeke. “Look, the red, it’s fading.”

Although the bright red rash was retreating a little, it didn’t entirely go away.

“Your spirit animal has eased his suffering, but there is only one cure,” said Jodoboda. “We are leaving to attend to other matters and will return before sunset tomorrow. Bring the banana gourds here. If you succeed, we will allow you passage to the Lake of the Elephant. Fail, and your friend will die. We will take you to our borders . . . and whatever fate awaits you beyond our lands.”

“Where is the deep swamp?” asked Conor.

Jodoboda smiled a grim smile.

“It is *your* task, not mine,” he said, and walked away to a waiting rhino. Leaping onto its back, he patted its flank and took hold of a chain that pierced the base of its pointed horn. Jodoboda raised his hand and pointed to the west. A great snorting and bellowing came from the riders, and then they were all in motion at once, leaping onto their leathery steeds and charging out of the clearing, many of them swerving to avoid the small knot of Greencloaks and the great rock.

Tarik freed Abeke and she helped him free the others. Meilin did not move from Rollan’s side, her hand on Jhi’s neck as the panda continued to slowly lick the boy’s head.

“Lishay, do you know where the deep swamp is?” asked Abeke.

“Roughly,” answered Lishay. “We’d best get going as soon as we can. Tarik, perhaps you should stay with Rollan and Meilin?”

“I am not sure,” said Tarik. “I doubt if the rhino riders have really left this place unguarded. Rollan should be safe enough here with Meilin.”

The falcon lifted her head and gave a piercing whistle.

“And with Essix and Jhi, of course,” added Tarik. “You may need me — and Lumeo — in the swamp.”

“We’re only going to get some banana gourds,” said Abeke. “How hard can that be?”

No one answered.

“We can’t leave yet,” said Conor. He was staring at Meilin with pinched intensity. “I have to say . . . I have to know. Meilin . . . why did you come back?”

She stood up and faced him. The air between them crackled with tension, and Abeke instinctively went to intervene. They couldn’t fight about *that* again now.

But they didn’t fight.

“I . . . I made a mistake,” said Meilin. “I shouldn’t have left, Conor.”

“Oh,” said Conor. His ears turned bright red, but he didn’t drop his eyes, and for the first time in days he didn’t apologize. “I’m glad,” he said. “Did you find your father?”

Meilin nodded, then shook her head sharply once. Clearly she didn’t want to talk about that.

“I got lost on the way into Zhong. A Marked woman rescued me in the Great Bamboo Maze. I think she used to be a Greencloak. Her name was Xue.”

“Xue!” Tarik exclaimed.

“You know her?” asked Meilin.

“I thought she was dead,” said Tarik. “Xue left the Greencloaks when I was young. She said there was too much talking and not enough doing.”

“And she’s right,” said Meilin, looking down at Rollan. “Even now, we’re too much talking and not enough doing.”

“Yes,” said Lishay, nodding. “We must go.”

Abeke and Conor looked at each other, then back at Meilin. They had only just been reunited, and now they were parting again. It felt . . . not wrong exactly, but dangerous. Tempting fate.

“Good luck,” said Meilin, turning back to Rollan and Jhi.

“You too,” said Conor. “Look after him.”

“We’ll be back soon,” Abeke promised them all.



DANGEROUS WATERS

“WE’LL NEED OUR SPIRIT ANIMALS TO GUIDE US FROM HERE onward,” said Tarik, surveying the swamp ahead. For the last hour the ground had been gradually sloping down, and the jungle floor had become wetter and wetter as the trees began to thin. Now they faced open ground with pools of stagnant water lined at the edges with tufts of reeds. Small islands of mud were dotted everywhere, surrounded by thick rafts of clotted weeds. Brightly colored fungus peeked at them from every nook and grotto. Conor didn’t recognize any of the species but felt safe assuming they were all deadly.

“Uraza won’t like this,” said Abeke, calling her spirit animal forth.

“Neither will Briggan,” said Conor, doing the same.

“Best to have them ready to help, though,” said Lishay. She scratched Zhosur behind the ears and the tiger purred, almost like a house cat, though it was much deeper and three times as loud.

“What do banana gourds grow on?” asked Conor.

“Palmlike trees,” said Lishay. “There must be a bigger island somewhere. They wouldn’t grow in this part of the swamp.”

“I wonder if Briggan could smell a banana gourd tree,” said Conor. He bent down by the wolf and looked into his eyes. “Do you know banana gourd trees?”

Briggan licked his face. Conor leaned back, laughing. It was the first time he had laughed for a long time. Meilin’s return had released something that had been tied up very tightly inside him.

“I’m not sure if that’s a yes. Will you lead the way, Briggan?”

The wolf turned on his tail and set out into the swamp, sniffing the ground and taking a meandering path to the nearest small island.

“I think we should follow him exactly,” said Conor. “Unless you want to fall in.”

They all waded carefully after Briggan. Zhosur didn't seem to mind the water too much, but Uraza yowled with her first steps, and tried to lift her paws high out of the water.

“It's not that bad,” said Abeke. “There's solid ground up ahead. Somewhere.”

“And Briggan's doing a great job of finding the way through,” said Conor. A moment later the wolf disappeared with a loud splash, reappearing a few seconds later, violently dog-paddling in a circle back to where he'd stepped off.

“I shouldn't have distracted him,” said Conor loyally, quickly brushing the mud and slime off the wolf.

“Too much water,” said Tarik. “He can't smell the path. This is a job for Lumeo, I think.”

Lumeo made a chuckling noise and launched off Tarik's shoulder into the water, flowing into it as if he were liquid himself. He duck-dove several times, sped up and down the line of Greencloaks, and then went ahead, sometimes swimming, sometimes leaping around on the muddy parts.

“Give him a few minutes, and he'll find us a good path ahead,” said Tarik.

Lumeo returned and led them on into the swamp. A few miles in they found several larger islands that were higher and drier than the previous mounds of mud. But even when they had trees, none of them turned out to be banana gourd trees.

“It's getting dark,” said Conor, looking up at the sky. “We'd better choose an island to camp on.”

“I don't think that's a good idea,” said Lishay.

“We're not seriously going to walk through this at night, are we?”

“Look,” said Tarik, pointing at his spirit animal.

Lumeo was standing up on his hind feet, his head cocked to one side. A moment later, Briggan whined and started to circle around Conor. The two big cats pricked up their ears and both growled simultaneously.

Far off in the distance, they saw the flare of torches, dipping up and down. There was a long line of them, but it was too dark already to see anything but vague shapes behind the flames.

“People with torches, wading,” said Tarik. “Strange . . .”

“They're not the rhino riders,” said Conor, certain that Briggan would have recognized their scent.

“I can see something in the water,” said Tarik.

Lumeo jumped wetly to Tarik's shoulder. Man and otter peered into the darkness, toward the flickering lights.

“Some things . . . moving fast.”

“Could be crocodiles,” said Lishay. “But the crocs here are freshwater ones, they aren’t very big, and they don’t attack humans —”

“Unless they are affected by the Bile,” said Tarik bleakly. “They’re moving fast, being driven by that line of torchbearers.”

“Toward us,” said Abeke. “That can be no accident.”

“Hadn’t we better get on one of these islands, then?” asked Conor nervously. He wouldn’t be happy until he was up on dry land.

“Yes, that’s our best option,” said Tarik. The few bigger islands were already turning into dim silhouettes in the twilight. He pointed to the closest. “Lumeo, find us a way to that one.”

Lumeo wasted no time playing around now. The others followed him quickly, relieved to get out of the water and up onto the island. But it was only a few feet above the water, with some sickly palms at the center. There was no real cover, and no defense against crocodiles or the people who were herding them.

“It’s very dark,” said Conor.

“Try tapping into Briggan’s senses,” said Tarik. “You too, Abeke. Ask for your spirit animal’s help. That’s what I do with Lumeo.”

“And I with Zhosur,” said Lishay. “Not all bonds are the same, but —”

Lishay never finished her sentence, her hand flashing to her sword hilt. There was an abrupt thrashing in the water nearby, and suddenly two huge crocodiles swarmed up the muddy slope of the island. Each was over twelve feet long and swollen with hideous muscle. Their deep-set eyes were red with more than just anger.

These are no spirit animals! thought Conor as the crocodiles charged straight at the Greencloaks.

The two big cats leaped at the closest crocodile. Zhosur jumped over its head with a snarl and fastened his huge jaws on the reptile’s left rear leg. Uraza followed a moment later to fasten on to the croc’s right. Both hung on, digging their paws into the mud as the croc whipped its tail and writhed backward, trying to snap at them with its three-foot-long, toothy jaw. As it strained to bite them, Tarik sprang forward and thrust his sword two-handed up into the soft parts of its throat.

Briggan confronted the second croc, jumping aside at the last instant as it snapped at him, then jumping again to lead it farther inland, allowing Conor to chop at the croc’s hindquarters with his ax.

Abeke, standing calmly where she was, nocked an arrow and sent it at the croc’s head. She aimed for the eye, but missed it by a fraction of an inch, the arrow ricocheting off the reptile’s thick hide. The croc snapped again at Briggan, ramming into a tree as the wolf ducked aside, only narrowly avoiding losing his tail to the wickedly pointed teeth.

Without even thinking about what he was doing, Conor ran up the crocodile's broad back, balancing precariously on the spiny ridges. The crocodile backed away. Conor almost fell off, but managed to raise his ax over his head and bury it deep into the crocodile's head, just behind its eyes.

To his amazement and horror, that didn't kill it. If anything, it only made it more enraged. The ax remained embedded as it flung its head from side to side, roaring, then rolled completely over. Conor only just jumped aside before it crushed him beneath its bulk.

His ax lost, he drew his knife, though that would be of little use.

The crocodile turned, impossibly tight, and advanced, the ax like some strange crest sticking out of its head. Conor kept his eyes fixed on its furious red glare, ready to dodge aside as it snapped at him.

Then Abeke appeared at his side and sent an arrow at point-blank range into one eye socket and then the next, both of them driven home with such power that they disappeared up to their fletches. The crocodile lurched forward several paces, claws clutching at the mud, then collapsed at their feet.

Tarik came over and helped Conor pull his ax out of the dead croc. Its twisted muscles were still as hard as rock.

"Quickly!" called Lishay, standing on the back of the second croc and surveying the swamp around them. "Cut some staves from the tree and get going. There are more of these vile creatures coming."

Conor's ax came free with a hideous sucking sound. Tarik clapped his hand on Conor's shoulder and went to join Lishay.

"Keep moving along our present course," he said to Conor and Abeke. "We'll lead the other crocodiles away and catch up when we can."

"Is that safe?" Abeke asked.

"Don't worry," said Lishay. "You'll be fine if you stay under cover."

The girl's teeth flashed in the dark. "I meant safe for you."

Tarik grinned in return. He exchanged a look with Lishay, who nodded, then the two of them and their spirit animals raced off to the other side of the island, shouting and splashing as they entered the water. There were answering roars and shouts off in the distance, and Conor and Abeke saw the line of lights from the torchbearers began to move after the older Greencloaks.

"Is it just me, or are they having too much fun?" asked Conor.

"The trust of a good friend is precious," Abeke said. "It makes bearable even the darkest of nights."

Conor shifted awkwardly on his feet. He wasn't sure if she was talking about Tarik and Lishay, or about how he had betrayed Rollan's trust. What if Meilin's return wasn't enough to heal the breach between them? If Rollan died, they might never get the chance to make up. . . .

"Cut some staves for us, as quietly as you can," said Abeke. "Uraza and I will keep watch."

Conor went to the nearest tree and began to cut off some branches, holding the ax close to the head, so he could chip away very quietly. Even though he knew Abeke and Uraza were watching his back, he couldn't help but feel shivers along his spine. Every slight sound made him think a crocodile was about to leap upon him.

He had never cut a pair of staves so quickly. Handing one to Abeke, they crossed to the far side of the island and began to feel for a path.

"Which way do we go?" asked Conor. He had lost track of the landmarks during the fight.

"That way," said Abeke, pointing. "According to the stars, that is the way we were going. Toward the sign of the Elephant's Trunk, see?"

Conor looked up where she was indicating. A row of stars did suggest the outline of an elephant's trunk, though it was not a constellation he knew.

"Perhaps that's good luck," he whispered, glad that there at least were stars to look at. There were clouds over the swamp, but not so many as in the jungle. He wished the stars provided a little more light, though, so he could see anything creeping up on him.

Briggan nudged his hip to get Conor's attention. He looked down into the wolf's black eyes, wondering what they had picked out of the darkness.

"Wait a moment," he said to Abeke. "Remember what Tarik said about using our animals' senses?"

"Of course!"

She bent down and hugged Uraza. Conor knelt by Briggan's side and did the same.

"Shut your eyes," he said, "and ask."

They shut their eyes, and both mumbled a request to their spirit animals to help them see.

When they opened them again, Conor gasped. He *could* see much more, but it was like the world was lit by a curious bluish light. It wasn't bright enough to cast shadows, but he could see farther across the water.

He also could smell much more, particularly Briggan, but he could now identify the different smells of the plants nearby, and Uraza, and Abeke, and himself. Conor wrinkled his nose and sneezed, muffling it at the last minute with his hand.

Briggan looked up at him with a tongue-lolling grin, and whuffed as though amused by his reaction.

"Did it work?" asked Abeke.

"Yes," said Conor. "I can smell better too! What about you?"

"I'm not sure," said Abeke slowly. Uraza's head butted hard against hers, rubbing from side to side. "It is lighter, but my eyes feel strange. . . . It will take a bit of getting used to, this ability. I think you should lead, for now."

They waded out, Conor prodding the ground in front and close to either side as he went, with Abeke and the spirit animals reluctantly following. Uraza actually hissed with almost every step, and Briggan growled several times when the water became deeper, or there were reeds and water-weeds to wade through. Conor used his enhanced senses to study the water around him as closely as he followed the stars ahead, but either there was nothing in there or he still couldn't see it.

They walked and waded in this way for several hours, until Conor found himself stepping through shallower water, and slowly they climbed out onto the shores of a much larger island. With his new night sight he could see the dim silhouettes of large trees farther up, but he wasn't sure how far away they were. However, they did offer the hope of finding banana gourds, the first suggestion they had yet had that they were going in the right direction.

"I think we should rest here," he said quietly. As they moved, the ground beneath them had turned from mud to something like damp earth, the reeds giving way to a softer grass. "We can look for the banana gourds at dawn."

"Yes," said Abeke. "I'll take the first watch."

"Are you sure? Briggan and Uraza can watch for us. You must be as tired as I am, and I can barely stay awake."

"I'm not so tired," said Abeke stiffly, although Conor was sure she really was.

"All right, you take the first watch," he said. There was no shame in admitting to exhaustion. Besides, they would be no help to Rollan or anyone else if they were both so worn out they made mistakes.

Sighing, he lay down in the grass, setting his ax close by his hand. A couple of leeches he hadn't noticed fell off his wrist, bloated with blood. "Uh, can you tell when an hour's up?"

"The stars will tell me," said Abeke.

"Wake me in an hour, then," said Conor. He scratched Briggan's head. The wolf gave a throaty rumble and lay down next to him, a warm and comforting body. A moment later, Conor was fast asleep.



ALONE

IT WAS VERY QUIET AFTER EVERYONE LEFT THE CLEARING. JHI stopped licking Rollan's head, but she lay down next to him and put a paw on his chest, where Essix had been sitting. Essix hopped onto the panda's shoulder, wanting to be higher but not willing to be separated from Rollan.

Meilin's options now were limited. Since the others had left, she'd done little more than pace restlessly around the rhino-shaped rock to make sure there weren't any enemies hiding nearby. Or rhino riders. She wasn't sure if they could be called enemies or not. They certainly weren't allies. She had a suspicion that Jodoboda had been playing a trick on the others, sending them off in search of something that would ultimately prove to be useless. While she stayed behind, feeling useless herself.

My hope lies with you, her father had said. How was she helping him now, sitting here doing nothing? Sometimes she wished someone *would* attack, just so she would have something to do.

She came back to Rollan and looked down at him. Jhi's healing powers had lessened the red rash on his face, but he still looked very sick. She didn't want to imagine what would happen if Jodoboda's so-called cure didn't work.

"I hope those banana gourd seeds help you, Rollan," she said, unable to keep the tension from her voice, then jumped as the boy suddenly opened one eye, just a crack.

"Blo doo hi," he whispered. It took her a moment to work out he'd said, "*So do I.*"

Meilin knelt by his side.

"Do you need some water?"

Rollan shook his head slightly. He still only had one eye half open.

“Oog aim vack,” he said, which she correctly interpreted as “*You came back.*”

“Don’t talk,” she said. “Save your strength.”

“Cold,” said Rollan. The word was quite clear. Meilin frowned. It was as hot as ever in the jungle clearing. But she saw Rollan’s pack nearby, so she got a blanket from it and wrapped him up in it.

“Is that better?” she asked anxiously, but Rollan did not reply. Jhi stirred and leaned across, then started to lick the boy’s head again.

Essix looked at her, and Meilin wondered what else she could or should do to help him. Rollan’s life had been entrusted to her, but something more than pride drove her to want to help him. He was unruly and impulsive, and his sense of duty was very different from hers. He still hadn’t agreed to become a Greencloak! But she had no doubt that in her shoes he would think of something to make her feel better, even if it was just to make her laugh. Or try to. Sometimes he could be so annoying. . . .

A faint noise came from one of the nearby clumps of elephant grass. Immediately she stood up, her staff ready. The tops of the grass were waving — perhaps caused by something as innocent as a breath of wind, or by stealthy movement of something coming toward them.

Essix launched from Jhi’s shoulder with a screech, shot up to a height of about a hundred feet, and hovered there, watching whoever or whatever it was that was approaching.

Essix didn’t screech a warning or dive to attack, but even so, Meilin’s grip on her staff tightened and she adopted a defensive stance, ready for whatever might spring out of the elephant grass.

It wasn’t a tiger and it didn’t leap.

It was Xue, with her towering pack, the old woman hunched over beneath it. She emerged from the taller grass and walked toward Meilin.

“Xue! I didn’t expect to see you again!”

“Why not?” asked Xue.

“Um, I . . . I just didn’t,” said Meilin. “What are you doing here?”

“Selling pots to the Tergesh,” said Xue. She set her pack down and slowly straightened out, her hands on her hips. “They gather here, this time of year. Or they usually do,” she added, looking around at the empty grass.

“They’re coming back,” said Meilin. “Tomorrow. My friends have gone to complete a task set by their leader, Jodoboda.”

“The Tergesh and their tasks!” said Xue. She bent down and looked at Rollan. A second later, Essix landed near her and hopped onto Rollan’s chest.

“Oh, this one’s yours, is he, Essix?” asked Xue. “Sunset Death. Not good. You have any banana gourd seeds?”

“No,” said Meilin. “Are they really a cure? The others have gone to get some. . . .”

“Part of the cure,” said Xue. “He is unlucky to have caught it. Insect bite gone wrong. We need to move him near the rock.”

“Why?” asked Meilin.

“Rain,” said Xue, pointing at the sky. She pointed at the rock. “We’ll take shelter there.”

“The rain’s warm,” said Meilin doubtfully. “Should he be moved?”

“Won’t feel warm to him,” said Xue. She opened the top of her pack and rummaged around inside, pulling out a tightly folded square of oiled silk, some light cord, and several tent pegs. Going over to the rock, she quickly erected a shelter, tying the waterproof fabric off to the horn and pegging the other end down.

“You take his legs,” she said to Meilin, going to Rollan’s head and lifting him under the shoulders. “Essix, you fly. Too heavy.”

Surprisingly, Essix did exactly as Xue said, flying off to perch on the rhino horn on the rock, while Meilin and Xue carried Rollan to the shelter. Jhi ambled after them and pushed her way under the makeshift tent next to Rollan, leaving no room for anyone else.

“Ha!” cackled Xue. “The panda is lazy . . . and a water-shirker.”

They had barely gotten Rollan settled when the shower suddenly began, not with any preliminary drops, but a full-on deluge, as if high above someone had just overturned a giant bucket. Meilin crouched with her back against the rock, which didn’t really do anything to stop the rain but felt like it might help somehow. Xue dragged her pack over, rummaged in it again, and produced a beautiful waxed-paper umbrella, illustrated with pictures of a dancing mouse. It was evidently modeled on her spirit animal, who was either in the dormant state or lurking in his special pocket.

“Tarik . . . the senior Greencloak with us,” said Meilin hesitantly. “He said that he’d heard of you. You retired from the Greencloaks years and years ago. . . . Is that true?”

“Greencloaks rarely retire,” said Xue. “I took a long leave of absence. Probably time to come back. The younger ones are not so well-trained.”

“Well, we’ve only just started,” protested Meilin. “And we haven’t done too badly. We’ve gotten the Granite Ram, and even though we lost the Iron Boar, there was . . . an understandable reason for that —”

Xue laughed a short, high-pitched laugh.

“Not you! Olvan, Lenori. Always forgetting my lessons.”

“Oh?” said Meilin, wondering at the thought that Olvan and Lenori were once students like her. And bad students at that. It was impossible to imagine!

“We should make fire for tea,” said Xue, not letting herself be drawn on the subject. “Collect dry rhino dung before it gets too wet. There are piles of it near the jungle edge, under trees.”

“I’ll go,” said Meilin, jumping to her feet, water cascading off her shoulders where it had gathered.

“Yes,” said Xue.

Five minutes later, as she gathered the driest rhino dung she could find, Meilin wondered why she had volunteered so readily. She would never have dreamed back home that she would ever do something like collect dung, even if the dry pieces really just felt like pieces of light wood.

But she wanted Xue to respect her, and the only way to do that was to do what needed to be done. Even if it was something like collecting dung for a fire.

At least she didn’t feel quite so trapped now. She had someone to talk to whose words she didn’t have to think twice about before understanding them.

She smiled. That was the kind of thing Rollan might have said.

The rain eased off as she walked back, and then it stopped abruptly. The clouds edged apart, and Meilin caught a glimpse of the setting sun through the western tree line. Under Xue’s direction, she stacked the dry dung in a pyramid in the lee of the rock, some distance from the shelter. Xue lit it with a twisted piece of oily paper and a clockwork fire starter, a beautifully enameled egg in two halves that had to be turned fifteen times. It would not have been out of place in her father’s treasure cabinet, Meilin thought.

Xue rigged up her tripod and cooking pot, and made tea. After they drank their own, Meilin took some of the cooled tea and spooned it into Rollan’s mouth. After several tries she got him to swallow some, but he wasn’t really conscious, and he did not speak again.

“You’re good to care for him,” the old woman said with an approving nod.

“Who else is going to do it?” Meilin said with a frustrated sigh.

“Caring takes many forms.”

“You mean there’s something else I should be doing?”

“No.” Xue squinted with one eye, but the other was wide open. “*You* know. Loneliness is a kind of death too.”

Meilin looked away, not really understanding but feeling as though Xue was seeing her with a clarity that made her uncomfortable.

“Jodoboda said he will die by tomorrow’s sunset unless he has the cure,” Meilin said, to bring the conversation back on track.

“This is true,” said Xue. She took a jar of rice out of her pack, some dried meat that was probably rat, and several herb containers, and began to prepare dinner. “But not until then. After dinner, we

sleep. The animals will keep watch. Zap too.”

She opened the top of her jacket. The jumping mouse lived up to his name by jumping out. He ran over to Meilin, who held out her hand. He climbed into it and she lifted him up near her face to see him better in the twilight. He was entirely white, but did not have an albino’s red eyes. His eyes were deep, and very knowing.

“I used to think only the big, fierce spirit animals were any good,” Meilin confessed, carefully setting Zap back down. He jumped over to Jhi and sat near her front paw, like some small retainer sitting before the empress.

“Big, small, doesn’t matter,” said Xue. “It’s a spirit animal! Not a simple animal. True strength is unrelated to size or fierceness.”

“I guess I’m getting to know that,” said Meilin with a glance at Jhi.

“True bonds test us,” Xue said with a nod, collecting up their empty bowls. “Sleep now.”

Meilin looked at Rollan, thinking of his sharp wit and how, even though he hadn’t taken any vows, he had stayed when she had not. She realized for the first time that she thought of him not just as an equal, but as a friend. She hadn’t ever really had any friends before. Just servants and the children of officers lower ranking than her father.

“Is there really nothing else I can do?”

Xue shook her head. “Tell me your dreams, later, if you have any strange ones.”

“Will they . . . tell the future?”

“No. I like a good story.”

Meilin forced herself to lean back against the rock. It was too wet to lie down, but some of the warmth from the fire reached her. She was restless and tired at the same time. She watched Rollan lying with the spirit animals, his breath shallow. It was awful, being so helpless, knowing that unless Abeke and Conor and the others got back in time with the banana gourd seeds, he would die. But he wasn’t alone, and neither, now, was she.

“I shouldn’t have gone away,” she whispered, as much to Rollan as to herself, although she knew he couldn’t hear her. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

TALL TREES AND THORNBUSHES

ABEKE WOKE UP WITH A START. THE FIRST FAINT LIGHT OF dawn was falling on their sleeping spot in the grass. Conor was slumped on his side nearby, curled up next to Briggan. The wolf looked at her with ears standing straight upright. Uraza was sitting on her haunches next to him, licking mud from her fur.

Abeke's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't woken Conor to take his watch. In fact, she had nodded off and fallen asleep through her watch as well. They had been completely exposed, and it was her fault!

She staggered up and looked around. They were on a large island, all right, and the big trees were *really* tall palm trees, the smallest easily a hundred feet high. They were all lined up along a central ridge several hundred yards away, and perhaps a hundred feet higher, well out of the swampy ground.

Best of all, she could see they had bunches of some kind of curvy fruit hanging from the upper branches. They had to be banana gourds!

She went off a little way to think very hard about what to do. She could lie and tell Conor that she had let him sleep, or she could confess and tell him the truth about what had happened. She called herself a hunter of the Niloan savannah, yet she had fallen asleep on her watch!

When she returned, Conor was muttering in his sleep, as if he was having a nightmare.

"The sheep! We'll never get them all in! What are you doing? No, not that way! No, not that way!"

She crouched down next to him and touched his shoulder. He sat bolt upright with eyes wide open, panting.

“You were having a bad dream,” she said.

“I was,” he said, looking around him. “The flock . . . there was a . . .” His eyes fell on Briggan, and he reached out to hug the wolf. “Wait, the sun’s up. What happened to our agreement? Why did you let me sleep?”

How easy it would be to lie, she thought. He trusts me.

“I dropped off without realizing,” she said, prepared for his anger. “That was why I didn’t wake you up. I was asleep too. I’m sorry.”

He nodded gravely. “So Uraza kept watch, with Briggan?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see the problem.” He smiled at her. “They would have woken us if anything had come near. Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone. Okay?”

She hesitated, and then said, “Okay.”

He stood up and looked at the sun, the swamp, and the trees, in that order.

“I don’t suppose there’s time for breakfast,” he said, not sounding terribly hopeful.

“We’ve only got till nightfall to find the banana gourds and get them back to Jodoboda,” Abeke said, standing up and stowing her bow and arrows. “We can eat while we walk.”

“I guess so.” He rubbed at the sleep still crusting his eyes, and Briggan yawned in sympathy, white teeth and red gums gleaming in the morning light. “These banana gourds had better work.”

Abeke didn’t speak. She hoped Jodoboda was telling the truth about a cure for Rollan. She also hoped that Tarik and Lishay were all right, and that they had managed to lead the crocodiles far away. Because getting the banana gourds was one thing. Returning with them to the rhino riders across the swamp might be another altogether.

The ridge was higher than it looked, and it was more difficult to get to the palm trees than the two Greencloaks had anticipated. Halfway up the slope there were thornbushes blocking their way, and even Briggan and Uraza could not find a way through them, so they had to walk along and look for a gap. When they eventually did find one, it led into another wall of thorny hedges.

“This is a maze,” said Conor. “Like that bamboo one Meilin said she went through.”

“That’s much bigger,” replied Abeke. “Huge. This is small. I believe these are called snarevines.”

“It’s going to slow us down for sure,” said Conor gloomily. “And we can’t waste any time.”

“There might be a way,” Abeke said. She pointed to the nearest tree. It was about twenty yards away, across the tangle of thornbushes, and perhaps twenty feet up the slope. “What if one of us used the Granite Ram to jump to the lowest branch on that tree?”

Conor looked up and frowned.

“Across thorns? If it didn’t work . . . and even if it did, those branches don’t look strong.”

“We have to try,” said Abeke. “There isn’t time to walk along the snarevine bushes, hoping to find a way in.”

“You’re right,” he said slowly. “Let me do it.”

Abeke shook her head. She took off her pack and laid her bow on top of it.

“I’m the best jumper, and I was the last one to practice with the Granite Ram,” she said. “Uraza will help me too.”

“I can do it,” Conor insisted. “I won’t let you down.”

Abeke shook her head again.

“It’s not that. Yes, I was angry with you, over the Iron Boar . . . but we’ve all made mistakes. I made one last night.”

“Mine was a particularly big one,” he started to say.

“If a crocodile had crept up on us last night, mine would have been pretty big too. We could be dead now, not arguing about who’s most at fault.”

He looked down at his feet, then back up at her.

“All right, then,” he said. “You are the best jumper . . . and we have no time for second chances.”

Abeke looked up at the tree and the thornbushes in between. She would have to do a standing jump, over the high thorns, up twenty feet and across about sixty, grab that branch there . . . which would probably break, but it would slow her down and she could drop from there to the ground. But she couldn’t see the ground. There could be anything there. More thorns, sharp stones, anything . . .

Uraza grumbled at her side. Abeke rested her hand on the leopard’s head.

“I’ll need your help,” she said. “You and the Ram.”

Uraza’s tail twitched, but the grumbling stopped. Abeke felt strength flow into her, strength and the feline grace of the big cat, energizing her muscles. She touched the Granite Ram that hung on its chain around her neck, and drew on its power too.

Then she jumped, and the earth seemed to fall away beneath her.

Conor’s whistle followed her as she flew through the air, high over the thorns. The whistle faltered when she reached the highest point of her incredible leap and it looked like she was going to miss the tree. Conor was forgotten as she flailed wildly for a branch on the way down, missed grabbing it properly, but slowed herself enough to spin end over end and land belly-first on the next branch down.

Winded, it was all she could do to hang on, relieved that she had at least come to a halt. She rocked backward and forward for a few seconds, raising one hand to wave at Conor to let him know

that she was okay. Then, with a horrible tearing noise, the branch came away from the tree.

For the briefest moment Abeke was suspended. Then she fell, hands desperately clawing the air for a hold that was no longer there.

“Abeke!” shouted Conor. Uraza yowled.

Fortunately the base of the tree was home to only young vines, so the thorns she landed on merely pricked her, rather than causing her serious harm. She lay among them, catching her breath, then called out to reassure Conor and Uraza so they wouldn’t try to follow her.

“I’m all right! I’ll go back up in a minute.”

The tree looked much taller than it had from down below. It also looked much higher than the mainmast of the *Tellun’s Pride*, though at least it wasn’t swaying from side to side. The bark of the trunk was rough, with sufficient handholds to get her to the first branch. Once she was breathing properly, she reached up and took a firm grip. Staying close to the trunk, she climbed carefully until the first branch was within reach, then just as carefully tested its weight. It held, so she transferred herself and pulled herself up.

From there she climbed carefully from branch to branch, quickly learning that the branches would come away if she planted her feet wrong and put too much weight on them.

“I see you!” called Conor when she ascended into view. “You’re doing great!”

Abeke didn’t turn to look. Just thinking of him so far below her made her falter.

She touched the Granite Ram again.

“Save me if I fall,” she whispered, and then felt a little ashamed to be so fearful. If she didn’t think about the thorns below or her steadily increasing altitude, and if she concentrated hard on where she put her hands and feet, she would be fine.

So she told herself, and so it was. After an ascent that seemed to last hours, she looked up and she saw a cluster of the banana-shaped gourds hanging halfway along a branch, slightly farther around the tree. There were six of the gourds there, two more than she needed. But she couldn’t reach them yet.

Abeke started to edge around as she climbed, going faster with the gourds now in sight. They were too far along the branch to reach, but she thought if she could break the branch off, they would fall to the ground. As she knew from her own fall, the vines were thick down there; the gourds should survive the descent.

But the branch wouldn’t break off. Abeke tugged at it and twisted it, but it simply wouldn’t come away from the trunk. The gourds didn’t fall off either, as she had hoped they might.

Abeke stopped working on the branch. There was another bunch of gourds higher up, and a little closer to the trunk. Maybe she could reach out and pull them off, one by one. She gave the branch another resentful tug, but when that didn’t work, started to climb again.

She was now at least fifty feet above the ground, and the higher branches were crackling under her feet, as if they were even more precarious than the ones lower down. Abeke started to climb faster, a little less carefully. She wanted to spend less time on each branch, giving it fewer chances to fail.

One cracked completely as she climbed, and she would have fallen if she had not leaped for the next. Shocked by the sudden noise and the lurch underneath her, Abeke accelerated again. Reaching the branch with the gourds, she leaned out and plucked them off incredibly quickly, letting them fall to the ground. One, two, three, four, and then another one for luck, and she was on her way, climbing back down, trying to keep hold with at least one hand every time she moved her feet.

She got to within twenty-five feet of the ground and was feeling incredibly relieved when disaster struck. Two branches broke at once, one under her hand and one under her foot. The crack of them breaking mixed with her shout as she fell backward from the tree.

Abeke plummeted. The chain holding the Granite Ram slipped over her head. It caught on her nose and for a frenzied second held there, as she crossed her eyes, staring at it and willing it to stay.

But it didn't, falling away with all the finality of a shooting star that will never be seen again.

Uraza yowled below, and with it Abeke felt a burst of unexpected power. Somehow she pivoted while falling, exactly like a cat, and hooked one leg over a lower branch. So gracefully she surprised even herself, she swung around the branch, grabbed another, and then swung to a third, making an astonishingly swift and acrobatic descent to the ground.

There, she searched anxiously among the vines for the Granite Ram, her heart pounding. If she'd lost it . . . that would be the second talisman gone. Conor at least had a reason to give away the Iron Boar. Just losing a talisman out of carelessness would be much worse. . . .

Then she saw the glint of the chain, draped across one of the fallen gourds. She put a hand to her throat and breathed again. Gathering up the Granite Ram, she slipped it over her head and knotted the chain to shorten it. There was no way that talisman would come off again!

It took her several minutes longer to find the gourds. In the end, she could only find four of the five. The fifth one must have rolled away, lost in the snarevine thorns.

"I've got four!" she shouted, tying them up in her shirt and buttoning her sailor's jacket over the top. "I'm going to climb up and jump to you."

Conor's anxious shout came back. "Be careful!"

Abeke retraced her slow ascent up the tree, more painfully than the first time, her muscles aching from the previous exertion and with numerous small bruises from her fall. She concentrated on moving very patiently. She would need all her strength, plus the powers of the talisman and her spirit animal, to make the leap back over the thorns safely.

Uraza clearly felt the risk too. When Abeke rose up above the vines and could see her again, the leopard was pacing backward and forward, continually looking up toward the tree and Abeke.

“Don’t move!” called out Abeke when she was about thirty feet up. “I don’t want to land on you!”

Uraza stopped and settled on her haunches. Conor stood perfectly still, Briggan at his side. Abeke looked down at them, held her breath, and jumped.

HOPE

MEILIN WATCHED THE SUN, AND THE SHADOW IT CAST FROM the horn of the rhino rock. Rollan hadn't said anything since complaining about the cold. Occasionally he shivered, as he was shivering now. His teeth chattered.

"It's the second hour of the afternoon," she said. As the day grew old, her patience with waiting grew short. "Maybe I should go and try to find them."

"They will come," said Xue.

Meilin turned to look at the old woman.

"Do you know that for sure?" she asked. "You're certain they'll be back with the banana gourds in time?"

"Yes."

"How? Have you had a vision or something?"

Xue shook her head. "I don't have visions. Just hope."

"Hope!" said Meilin. "Hoping won't do anything."

"So go," said Xue. "I'm not stopping you."

"What?" This Meilin couldn't believe. Xue would let her abandon Rollan and head off into the jungle on what might possibly be a fruitless quest . . . ?

Then she caught herself and realized that even she wasn't convinced that it was the right thing to do.

But what else *could* she do?

Jhi had been watching over Rollan the whole time, alternating between licking his head and placing a paw on his chest. At first, the violently red rash on his face had faded, but now it was even brighter and had spread down his neck and behind his ears. His breathing was becoming increasingly ragged.

Her heart ached in sympathy, as though she were coming down with something too.

She knew she couldn't stay and watch him die.

"You'll really let me go?" she asked Xue, wondering if this was some kind of trick.

"Of course. Too comfortable to get up."

That had to be a lie. Even with the grass to sit on, the ground was hard.

"Then . . . I *will* go. Will you stay and look after Rollan?"

"Not going anywhere," said Xue. "Got to sell some pots to the Tergesh."

"Jhi, you should stay too," said Meilin.

"The panda is too lazy to leave," laughed Xue. "Except as a tattoo."

Xue's nonchalance made Meilin feel slightly foolish, but she was determined to go now that she had come to a decision. If Xue was trying to talk her out of going by *not* talking her out of going, that simply wouldn't work.

"I'll go as far as the swamp," said Meilin. "I might be able to see them from there."

She picked up her staff and looked down at Rollan. The shivering had ceased for the moment. It left him looking completely lifeless, or nearly so.

"Are you *sure* there's nothing else we can do for him?" she asked.

Xue shook her head, all levity lost.

"I'll be back before nightfall," said Meilin. "With the others. And the banana gourds."

Xue smiled again.

"See? Hope is good. Powerful."

Meilin didn't feel very powerful, but that was all she had.

At the edge of the clearing she looked back, feeling a mental tug. It was strange going off into the jungle without Jhi. They hadn't been separated since the ceremony that had joined them together. The panda lifted her head to look at her, and their eyes met.

"Look after him," whispered Meilin.

Xue turned her head as if she'd heard the whisper, which was impossible. Meilin blushed and looked away, the sensation uncomfortable. She never blushed, and there was no reason to blush now. Was there?

Jhi bent down to Rollan again, and Meilin strode off into the jungle.



SUNSET

ABEKE *ALMOST* MADE IT. SHE FELL SLIGHTLY SHORT AND landed on the very edge of the thorn trees, crashing through them to tumble onto the path near Conor, one sleeve already bloody from where the thorns had ripped through her coat and shirt, and the skin beneath.

Conor rushed to her side, but Uraza was even faster. The leopard whined and nosed Abeke, who slowly sat up and looked at her arm.

“Is it bad?” asked Conor. He was already tearing off his shirttail to use as a bandage, but he stopped as Abeke held up her hand.

“Just scratches,” said Abeke, pulling the torn cloth apart to investigate. “Nothing very deep. And I got the gourds!”

She undid the knotted ends of her shirt and showed Conor the four banana gourds. They didn’t look like much, just curved, dry gourds the length of her index finger. Conor picked one up and shook it, the seeds rattling about inside.

“We’d better clean those scratches,” said Conor.

Abeke shook her head.

“Dry, clean thorns are better than swampy water,” she said, getting to her feet with a visible wince. “We must head straight back to have any chance of getting there before nightfall.”

“True,” said Conor. “Um, should I carry your pack too?”

“I can manage it,” said Abeke. She walked stiffly over to the pack, put the gourds in one of the pockets, and swung it on her back. Bending again slowly, she picked up her bow and staff, and began

to hobble down to the swamp, Uraza following at her heels.

Conor looked at Briggan, who cocked his head sideways and let his tongue loll out.

“I know, I know, she’s way tougher than me,” said Conor with resignation.

Striking back across the swamp in the daytime rather than at night following the stars, they had to depend on the sun for direction, and on Briggan. But clouds, with occasional downpours of rain, kept obscuring the sun, and the swampy water was too deep for Briggan to easily find a trail. So Conor poked ahead with his staff, checking with Briggan every now and then that they were at least headed in the right general direction.

It was slow going and very tiring, wading through water and reeds, or clomping over muddy banks. Both Conor and Abeke simply couldn’t go any faster, no matter how much they urged each other on. Their will was strong, but their bodies were just too tired.

Conor couldn’t see the sun, but he knew it was going down. He tried to increase the pace, lifting his feet higher out of the sucking mud. Rollan didn’t have forever: If they took too long or got lost, he would die.

Then they saw the crocodiles. Six of them, huge beasts much larger than any normal freshwater crocodiles that should populate the area. They were lying on the muddy shores of one of the low islands that dotted the swamp.

“Crocs!” warned Conor, hunkering down among the reeds, the water coming up to his armpits. Abeke did the same. Briggan and Uraza tensed beside their companions, quiet so as not to draw attention to them, but ready to spring into action if needed.

“We have to try to sneak around,” whispered Abeke.

Conor stood up and swapped his probing staff for the ax on his back. If he had to fight his way past crocs to get the gourds back to Rollan, then so be it. He wished Tarik and Lishay were with them, but there had been no sign of the Greencloaks since they had parted the previous day.

“There are too many to sneak past,” he said. “But if I rush them . . . I’ll distract them while you run.”

Abeke was still staring, her sharp hunter’s eyes intent on the crocs.

“I think they’re dead,” said Abeke. “Look, one is on its back. Crocs never sleep on their backs like that.”

“Maybe these monstrous ones do,” said Conor. But he felt a momentary hope.

They edged forward, Conor holding his ax ready to strike. As he neared the bodies, he saw that Abeke was correct. The crocs were lying absolutely still, at odd angles, their muscles straining even in death, twisting their legs and tails into tortured shapes.

“Maybe Tarik and Lishay killed them,” whispered Conor.

Abeke shook her head.

“No wounds, no blood.”

“Oh, right,” said Conor.

They drew nearer and nearer. At the waterline, Briggan and Uraza ran ahead, both of them sniffing at the bodies. Briggan recoiled and shook his head.

“Look at their eyes,” said Conor.

The crocs were already starting to smell. Their eyes had bulged out of their sockets and there was a black froth coming out of their noses.

“I think they were given Bile,” Abeke said. She hesitated, then added, “I saw this being done once. When I was with Shane and Zerif. Men fed what must have been Bile to animals, and squabbled over how much to use. I think it reacts differently when animals drink it. They don’t then bond with a human. They become enslaved monsters.”

“You saw it!” exclaimed Conor.

“I didn’t see what happened when too much was given,” said Abeke. “They transformed a dog, a nice dog called Admiral. They made it into a vicious monster, much bigger than it was originally. They must still be experimenting. . . . The Bile is a poison that has to be stopped!”

“It will be,” said Conor. “I hope. Come on. Rollan’s waiting. We *have* to go faster.”



“Solid ground at last,” said Conor wearily, some hours later, as they staggered out of the swampy water and onto the muddy shore of the jungle fringe. “I’m even glad to be heading back into the jungle.”

Abeke turned anxious eyes to the sun. “We’re too late,” she said bitterly. “We’ll never make it to the clearing in time.”

Conor looked up at the sky. The clouds had come back, but the faint disc of the sun could just be seen, a splash of orange behind the gray. It was already beginning to set.

They had failed. Despite their heroic efforts, they could never get back to the rhino rock in time. The two Greencloaks were exhausted, and even though it was easier than the swamp, the jungle was difficult to make their way through. Walking was hard enough, let alone running. All he could think about was Rollan waiting for them, feverish and ill, perhaps dying at that very moment.

Conor stopped, ankle-deep in the mud.

“Don’t just stand there!” croaked Abeke, struggling on. “We can’t give up now!”

“I’m not giving up,” said Conor angrily. He was very tired and wet and irritable, and he knew everywhere below his thighs was covered in leeches, even though he couldn’t feel them. “I’m

thinking! We should send the gourds ahead with Briggan and Uraza.”

The two spirit animals turned to look at him.

“They can hold two each in their mouths,” said Conor. “They can go much faster than us.”

Abeke stared at him. She was almost too exhausted to understand what he’d said.

“What if the rhino riders don’t consider the task completed unless we do it?” she asked.

“We have to risk it,” said Conor. “Surely they’ll still make the cure for Rollan?”

“I don’t like the idea of Uraza being . . . away from me,” said Abeke.

“I don’t like Briggan being away either,” said Conor. “But it’s our only chance of getting the gourds there on time. It’s *Rollan’s* only chance!”

Uraza put one strong paw on Abeke’s knee, as though to support Conor’s opinion. Her proud head tilted to one side.

“Yes, of course, you’re right,” said Abeke. She swung her pack off her back to get the banana gourds out. Uraza and Briggan came up to her. Each took two of the gourds gently in their jaws.

Conor hugged Briggan tightly. “I know you can do it,” he said. The wolf’s bark was muffled but firm, as though to say, *Of course we can!*

The two spirit animals sprang away, moving far more swiftly than the two children could have managed.

“Come on,” said Conor when Briggan and Uraza were out of sight. “We’ve still got a long way to go.”

He pulled his feet out of the mud with a sucking, popping sound.

Another sound came from behind, a chilling slither. For the briefest moment Conor thought it was Abeke moving. Then he knew it was not.

He spun around. Abeke crashed into him, leaping away from a huge, red-eyed crocodile that had slid up the muddy shore like an arrow shot out from under the water. It lunged at Conor, its massive jaws snapping at his leg.

Just before they closed, Conor thrust his staff in the way. The staff snapped in half, but held long enough for him to get his leg clear of the sharp teeth and stagger backward, leaving him holding only a broken tree branch to face an eighteen-foot-long Bile-enraged crocodile.

Abeke didn’t have time to get her bow. She snatched an arrow from her quiver and held it like a dagger, stabbing at the crocodile’s eyes from the side. Before she could find her mark, it whipped its head across and sent her flying. She landed in the mud ten feet away.

Conor tossed the broken staff into the croc’s gaping mouth and reached back for his ax, but he was stuck in the mud and his pack had ridden up. He couldn’t quite reach the haft of the ax strapped to the outside, and the croc was advancing once more, its jaws opening again.

“Ha!”

Meilin’s shout echoed out across the swamp as she brought her metal-bound staff down on the croc’s head. It swung to snap at her, giving Conor a precious few seconds to stagger away and fumble his ax free.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Meilin danced backward across the mud and onto dry land, the crocodile following her, roaring and thrashing its tail. Abeke strung her bow to hasten after the crocodile, followed by the mud-smearred Conor, his ax now held steadily in both hands. Meilin leaped onto the stump of a giant fallen tree, and the crocodile reared against it, gouging at the rotten timber with its claws and snapping at Meilin’s feet.

As the crocodile reared at Meilin, Abeke sent an arrow down its gullet. Conor swept the ax fast and low across the beast’s throat, silencing it.

The crocodile rolled away and thrashed a trail of bloody destruction halfway across the mudbank toward the open water before it finally died. Blood streamed from its many wounds, dark rivulets spreading across the brown mud.

Abeke sat down where she stood and let out a sigh that was half exhaustion and half relief. Conor stood next to her, leaning on his ax. Meilin jumped down, not looking tired at all.

“Where did you come from?” Conor asked her.

“I came looking for you,” she said. “When I saw Briggan and Uraza, I knew you must be close. Then I heard the croc. It was huge! Have you seen many like this?”

Abeke nodded somberly. “You know, General Gar’s crocodile, the one I saw . . . It was about twice as long.”

Conor shuddered. Even Meilin looked uneasy.

“Thanks, Meilin,” he said. “We’d better get moving. Briggan and Uraza have the banana gourds, but they’ll be no use to Rollan if he’s alone.”

“He’s not,” said Meilin. They exchanged stories as they set off. The sun was no longer visible behind the jungle trees, though the sky was still streaked with sunset colors. All Conor’s thoughts were with Briggan and Uraza. He hoped they would make it in time.

RETURN OF THE RHINO RIDERS

IT WAS FULLY DARK BY THE TIME MEILIN, ABEKE, AND CONOR finally reached the clearing. It was a different place from the one Meilin had left. Bright paper lanterns suspended from long bamboo poles lit up the area. Tents had been pitched in rings around the rhino rock, each with a rhino standing beside it, tethered to a thick iron peg hammered deep into the ground. The riders themselves were gathered around several large fires, eating, drinking, and talking.

Jodoboda was standing on the rhino rock, a golden goblet in his hand. Xue's shelter was gone, and Meilin could not see Rollan. There were too many rhinos and tents in the way. She started to walk faster, though for the last hour she had kept her pace to match the worn-out Conor and Abeke.

He can't be dead, she thought, her heart racing. Uraza and Briggan must have gotten here before sunset. Rollan has to be alive!

She started to run between the tents and rhinos, fearing what she might see, already imagining Rollan's lifeless body on the grass, Essix crazed and hooded, bound with jesses on her feet like any tame falcon gone feral. . . .

Jodoboda raised his goblet and gestured at the ground near the rock. Meilin slowed and schooled her face into its customary calm as she saw Xue sitting on her pack, a porcelain cup in her hand. And there was Jhi next to her, a welcome sight. And next to the panda there was . . .

Rollan, sitting up and grinning like an idiot, his face already a healthier pink. Essix was on his shoulder, preening her feathers. Briggan and Uraza sat next to Rollan, but they both leaped up as their companions came hurrying behind Meilin, and bounded over to greet them.

She walked forward, not saying anything until she could trust her voice not to catch. Her throat felt full and tight with unexpected emotion.

“So they made the cure for you,” she said. “I’m glad.”

“Not half as much as I am!” Rollan grinned up at her, and Meilin couldn’t help but blush. Confused by her emotion, she lowered her chin, watching him from under her eyelashes. She’d thought she’d never see that smile again.

“Xue told me I would be dead if you hadn’t gotten the seeds to Jodoboda in time,” he said. “Thank you.”

“It wasn’t me,” said Meilin. “It was Conor and Abeke.”

Conor and Abeke came up to stand on either side of her.

“We never would have gotten the gourds,” said Conor, “if Abeke hadn’t done those jumps.”

Abeke shrugged. “I jumped, but Conor led. It doesn’t matter who did what.”

“Wise girl,” said Xue, introducing herself to the curious Conor and Abeke. Zap poked his head out of her jacket and wiggled his whiskers at them in welcome.

“All I want to do is sit down, eat, and then wash myself off,” continued Abeke. “In that order!”

“A full belly makes you strong,” said Xue. “We should all eat.”

Meilin ignored her. She needed to say something important to the others.

“Jodoboda would never have captured you if I hadn’t left,” Meilin said. It was the closest thing to an apology anyone had ever heard from her. “Maybe you wouldn’t have gotten sick either.”

“I would have,” said Rollan, his expression pretending seriousness. “Those insects just couldn’t resist me!”

“But we would have seen how sick you were if we had been paying attention to each other,” said Abeke. “We were so busy being angry at Conor that we weren’t noticing the really important stuff.”

“We work well together, when we do,” said Conor with a bright smile. “Remember the puppet plan? We all came up with that, although we didn’t realize at the time. If you had been there, Meilin, it would’ve been even better.”

Meilin nodded. Abeke had told her how the three of them had snuck into Xin Kao Dai. It had been a good plan. Even Rollan seemed to agree.

“I think we’ve learned our lesson,” she said.

“Already better students than Olvan and Lenori,” said Xue with a quick wink.

The four children smiled at each other for a moment, then Abeke looked up at the leader of the rhino riders, tall and proud on his rock.

“Thank you for honoring our agreement and making the cure, Jodoboda.”

“I would have made it anyway,” said Jodoboda, raising his golden mug to her. “We keep many banana gourd seeds. The Sunset Death is not uncommon among my people.”

“What!” exclaimed Conor. “We almost got killed getting those gourds!”

“It was your task,” said Jodoboda. “I consider it completed, and your true reward will be as you asked. When your other companions return, we will show you how to find the Lake of the Elephant, and Dinesh.”

“They’re not back yet?” asked Abeke. “Where are they?”

“You do not know?” said Jodoboda.

Rollan looked up in alarm. “Where did they go?”

Abeke quickly told them about the monstrous crocodiles and the line of torchbearers who had driven them toward the Greencloaks. Jodoboda leaned down to listen, a frown on his leathery face.

“This is ill news,” he said when Abeke finished. “A force of Conquerors in the swamp, feeding poison to the crocodiles . . . I had not thought they could be here in strength. Pharsit Nang has always been left in peace. *We* have been left in peace. . . .”

“A stone alone is just a stone,” said Xue. “Many together can make a wall.”

Jodoboda smiled, but it was not a happy smile.

“So you have said before, Old Mother. But the rhino riders have always stood alone.”

“Hidebound,” said Xue with a sniff.

“We have to find Tarik and Lishay,” said Rollan, struggling to stand.

Xue put a hand on his shoulder and kept him down.

“We’ll go,” said Conor, though it clearly took all his strength to get the words out.

“*I’ll* go,” said Meilin, thinking of Tarik and Lishay wounded in the swamp, or besieged by crocodiles. . . .

“No,” said Jodoboda. “You have all done enough for now, even for Greencloaks. I will send riders to search for them . . . and to gauge the true extent of the Conquerors in our territory.”

He jumped off the stone and stalked out, calling out names. Riders around the big fires put down their food, and within a few minutes, a force of thirty rhinos was rumbling off along the jungle path toward the swamp.

“Tired young Greencloaks should eat,” said Xue, indicating her pot stewing over the fire. “I have a fine rat broth with bamboo shoots.”

“Rat?” asked Conor.

“It tastes good,” said Meilin. “Really.”

“I have eaten rat,” said Abeke. “Not as tasty as antelope. Can I have some, please?”

Xue smiled and bustled around, putting out bowls and spoons for everyone except Rollan, then ladling out portions of the delicious-smelling soup. Conor shared his with Briggan, but Uraza turned up her nose when Abeke offered some to the leopard.

“What about some for me?” asked Rollan plaintively.

Xue shook her head.

“No solid food till morning,” she said. “Rest now.”

“Just like home,” said Rollan. “Never enough to eat.”

But he lay back down on the grass, still wrapped in his blanket. Essix hopped off as he tilted over, and stalked across to stand near his head, a constant guardian. Rollan reached up to ruffle the falcon’s feathers, a new sign of intimacy that the bird had begun to welcome.

Within a second, the boy was asleep.

“That’s what I need to do,” said Abeke. “But I have to get clean first. What do the riders do to wash?”

“Wait for rain,” said Xue. She looked up at the dark sky. “About ten minutes.”

“Might as well just . . . just lie down, then,” mumbled Abeke, doing exactly that. Uraza came and stretched out next to her, paws set side by side on the ground and head placed gently upon them.

“I hope Tarik and Lishay are all right,” whispered Meilin. She edged closer to Rollan, and Jhi, who was sitting next to him, apparently snoozing. But the panda shifted as Meilin sat down next to her, and put out one heavy paw to rest it across the girl’s leg. The contact sent a feeling of security and comfort through her, putting all her anxieties temporarily to rest.



The next morning did not so much dawn as gradually steam into existence. The rain kept coming down, and the sun was not strong enough to break through. Everyone woke cramped, uncomfortable, and wet. The riders had kept the big fires going all night, despite the rain, but as Meilin soon discovered, there wasn’t much point trying to dry out next to them. One side would get less damp, while the other was as drenched as ever.

Breakfast came from the riders, who offered small cakes of rice mixed with some kind of mushroom. After they had eaten and sorted themselves out for the day, the Greencloaks gathered together at the rock to discuss what they should do. In the absence of Tarik, everyone looked to Xue, but the old woman refused to talk.

“I’m on holiday from the Greencloaks,” she said, taking up her pack and disappearing into the outer circle of rhino riders. “Got to sell some pots.”

“We should go and find Tarik and Lishay,” said Abeke.

Meilin shook her head, even though her fears regarding the elder Greencloaks had returned on waking.

“We should go to Dinesh right away and convince him to give us his talisman,” she said. “The Conquerors are already in the swamp, and there are a lot more of them cutting a way through the Great Bamboo Maze to the north, where I left my father. We might only be a few days ahead of them.”

“Meilin’s right,” said Rollan. He was much better. The rash was completely gone, though he still looked weak.

“Sure, but perhaps we should try to find Tarik and Lishay first,” said Conor.

“Jodoboda sent riders to look for them,” said Meilin. “They would want us to go on.”

“Where are we going to, exactly?” asked Conor. “Has anyone spoken to Jodoboda this morning?” He and the others looked around for him, craning their necks.

“There he is,” said Rollan. “Over near that fire.”

They moved as a group through the camp. Jodoboda turned to face them as they approached.

“Our guests are anxious to depart, I see,” he said.

“We need to get to Dinesh before the Conquerors,” said Meilin. “But have your riders found Tarik and Lishay?”

“We will soon know.”

Jodoboda held out his hand and gestured toward the jungle trail. A line of rhino riders was coming into the clearing. Several of the rhinos were riderless and had bodies strapped across their backs. Dead bodies. Jodoboda’s beard quivered as the muscles of his jaw tensed. His eyes narrowed in anger.

For a moment all the Greencloaks held their breath. But at the end of the line of rhinos two familiar figures were walking together, an otter on the man’s shoulder and a tiger at the woman’s side. Meilin felt a surge of relief.

“Together, your friends and mine have fought many poisoned crocodiles, such as those you spoke of last night,” said Jodoboda, quickly taking the measure of the situation. “The Conquerors will regret the day they brought this Bile into our lands!”

“You mean you’ll fight with us against them?” asked Meilin, wondering if she could convince him to send reinforcements to her father as well.

Jodoboda shook his head, disappointing her.

“We fight alone, as we have always done. But we will not let the Conquerors trespass.”

“Do you fight alone, yourself, when confronted by a foe too strong?” asked Xue, appearing from behind a crowd of rhino riders who were all holding new frying pans. “Or do you call on your riders?”

Jodoboda laughed.

“You never give up, do you? You know our traditions are as solid as the rhino rock.”

Xue sniffed and muttered, “Hidebound.”

Tarik and Lishay hurried over as the leader of the rhino rider patrol rode up and began talking quickly to Jodoboda.

“Rollan!” said Tarik. He looked muddy but unharmed. Lishay had a bloodstained bandage tied around her upper arm. “You look better! I knew that Abeke and Conor could get the banana gourds.”

Tarik saw Xue and gawped for a moment, then bowed.

“You must be Xue,” he said. “I am Tarik.”

“And I, Lishay. It is an honor to meet a famous Greencloak of . . . uh . . .”

“The past?” asked Xue.

“I was going to say of ‘your reputation,’” said Lishay.

“Are you joining us?” asked Tarik. “We could use your wisdom and advice.”

“Not just yet,” said Xue. “I still have pots to sell to some folk up north.”

“Oh,” said Tarik, obviously disappointed. He turned to Jodoboda. “The riders tell me that they will take us to the Lake of the Elephant. We must go now. Jodoboda, how far is it?”

“Less than a day’s ride,” said Jodoboda. “I will send a patrol, and you will ride with them. But tell me, where are the poisoned crocodiles and the Conquerors now?”

“All over the swamp, I hope,” said Tarik. “We led them in many different directions, splitting them up and attacking the smaller groups. . . . They even attacked each other once, last night. But they will gather again, and there are other mad animals, not just the crocodiles. Whatever this poison is —”

“Abeke thinks it’s the Bile,” Conor offered. “The substance Zerif mentioned that gives the Conquerors their spirit animals.”

Abeke nodded. “When I was with the Conquerors, I saw them transforming innocent animals with it.”

“You’ve seen what the Conquerors will do,” said Xue. “All the free peoples are needed to stop them.”

“And the talismans of the Great Beasts,” said Tarik. “I fear that the Conquerors may already be at the Lake of the Elephant.”

“The way there is hidden,” said Jodoboda. “They will not find it. Come, eat food, and clean and dress your wounds. The patrol will leave as soon as you are ready.”

“We’re really going to ride rhinos?” asked Conor excitedly.

“You say that as though it’s a good thing,” said Rollan with a worried look. Meilin, remembering how bad he was at riding horses, was unable to suppress a laugh.

LAKE OF THE ELEPHANT

THE WAY INTO THE LAKE OF THE ELEPHANT WAS WELL hidden. The rhino riders took the Greencloaks from the clearing along a path that gradually rose up a lengthy ridge, the jungle getting denser the higher they went. Eventually the path became more of a green tunnel, with the trees growing completely over the top and stitching themselves together with vines.

Rollan wasn't enjoying the ride. The rhinos, although smaller than their Niloan counterparts, were still very broad, and the Tergesh didn't use saddles themselves. For their passengers they had simply tied a rope around the rhino's middle. Rollan was holding on to his rope with one hand and the rider with the other, and simultaneously trying to grip the rough hide with his legs, but it was very difficult. He was feeling much better, but it still took all his energy to stay on. Several times his rider asked politely for him to stop clinging so tightly.

"I'm only holding on so tight because I'm worried your rhino will be embarrassed if I fall off," said Rollan.

The others seemed to be enjoying it. Conor whooped every time his rhino lumbered over a fallen log, and Abeke had even been allowed to swap places with her rider, to hold the chain that guided her rhino along the path.

Only Meilin rode silently. Rollan wondered if she was displaying less enthusiasm than the others in order to make him feel better.

The climb up the ridge seemed to take forever, but eventually they began to descend again, and Rollan stopped fearing that he would slip off into the mud. Halfway down, the lead rider took an even more overgrown side path, which was only just wide enough for the rhinos to pass between the ancient, massive trees. The ground became rockier, less muddy and wet, and there were fewer ferns and vines.

Another mile or so farther on, the path approached a rock face. The lead rhino reached it and disappeared. Rollan, who was on the next rhino, gasped and craned over the shoulder of his rider, wondering why they were still pressing on. Had the lead rider fallen into a hole?

Then he saw that there were actually two lines of cliff, one shielding the other. The lead rhino had turned into the narrow path between the two cliff faces, a path that led steeply down into dark shadows.

“How far’s the lake now?” Rollan asked his rhino rider. “Are we almost there?”

“The lake lies ahead, still some distance.”

That was what the rider always said.

“And will you wash the rhinos when you get there?” he asked, unable to resist a little dig in response.

“Rhinos do not bathe,” said the rider. “Their scent sets fear in the hearts of our enemies.”

“I bet.” Rollan screwed up his nose.

It was very dark on the steep path downward. The trail was little more than ten feet wide between the two rock faces, and the rocky walls were at least two hundred feet high. The sun shone overhead, but little of the light made its way down to the canyon floor.

The path descended for some time, but then started to climb again. The rhinos snorted as they labored up the trail, which became steeper and steeper. Their powerful muscles flexed without any sign of fatigue. But even as the path rose up, so did the cliffsides, stretching higher still.

After several hours, Rollan thought they must have climbed at least two thousand feet. There was still no sign the path would eventually lift them out of the crack between the cliffs. At least the air had become a little less warm and humid, a welcome change after the steam of the jungle.

Finally the path began to widen out, or rather the cliffs on either side drew back. The rhinos spread out to march in pairs, side by side, and then four abreast, and finally all eight rhinos extended out into a line.

At that point, the cliff walls on either side suddenly began to grow smaller, and in the space of a few hundred yards they dwindled to nothing. The ground opened up to reveal a lake ahead, a vast pool of beautiful blue water, not at all like the muddy swamp. The lake occupied a crater of some

kind, perhaps a dormant volcano, and in the middle of it there was an island with a step pyramid of gray stone built upon it. There appeared to be a dome on the top.

The rhino riders galloped their beasts down to the lakeshore and brought them to a stop in a great cloud of blown-up sand. As it cleared, Meilin suddenly fell off her rhino. She lay on the ground, stunned for a moment, looking up at the sky. Then she slowly got to her feet and stared around her at the crater walls, the island, and the sky.

“Meilin! Are you all right?” Conor was the first to leap from his own rhino, with Abeke and Rollan close behind.

Meilin didn’t answer immediately. She kept looking around, her eyes glassy. She was clearly dazed by the fall. Rollan took her shoulders and tried to sit her down, but as he did so, she suddenly stepped back and thrust her arms up and out, breaking his gentle hold.

“What’re you doing?” she said, suddenly alert and in the present once more.

“Helping you,” he said. “You fell off the rhino.”

“I fell off?” asked Meilin. She shook her head slightly. “I guess I was asleep. . . .”

“Outsiders often fall off,” said the rhino rider who had been carrying Meilin. “On the rare occasions we let them ride with us. Luckily you fell at the *end* of the ride.”

Meilin blinked and shook her head again.

“I’ll be all right,” she said. “Have we arrived?”

“This is the Lake of the Elephant,” said the rider. “We have brought you here as Jodoboda promised. Now we must return.”

The other Greencloaks slid off the rhinos’ backs, took up their packs, and waved good-bye as the rhino riders remounted and set off. Rollan hadn’t enjoyed the experience of being a rhino rider, but he wished they weren’t leaving so soon. He felt vulnerable on the lakeshore.

“I presume the island is where we need to go,” said Lishay.

Essix flew overhead, issuing a long, falling cry as she set out to inspect the way ahead. Jhi, who had chosen to travel in the dormant state, emerged with a flare of light and looked calmly out across the lake at the central island. Briggan paced along the shore, studying it with his clear blue eyes. Zhosur and Uraza tumbled out of their dormant states and briefly played some kind of cat tag, until Zhosur grew tired of it and gave up.

Lumeo, who had ridden the whole way on Tarik’s shoulder, slid down his arm and went to inspect the water. But rather than slipping into it, as he normally did when finding a pleasant stream or lake, he backtracked away, letting out a strange hissing noise.

“Lumeo?” asked Tarik. He drew his sword and warily approached the lake’s edge. Before he could get within a foot of the shore, a snakehead lunged up out of the clear water, needle teeth

snapping at him. With a shout, Tarik slashed at it. Two wriggling pieces fell onto the shore, which Tarik kicked back into the water. A second later, the lake boiled and frothed as dozens of other snakeheads ripped the dead one apart and ate it.

“We should have brought some of those fish traps from Xin Kao Dai,” said Rollan.

“We won’t be swimming across,” said Lishay. “And there are no trees to cut down for a raft.”

There was nothing useful at all around, as far as Rollan could see. The lake was about a mile in diameter and was completely surrounded by the rocky crater wall. The only way in was behind them, through the path that wound its deep, narrow way through the mountain.

Rollan blinked, and suddenly his vision was clearer, containing more colors than he was used to. His improved vision was coming from Essix. This was the second time it had happened in such a short period, and it was no less amazing than the first.

“There are people . . . at least I think they’re people . . . on the island,” said Rollan, shading his eyes and peering across the water. “They’ve got weird heads, way too big for their bodies. There are three of them watching us. . . . Look near the middle of the pyramid, at the bottom.”

The others all looked. They too could see the three small figures, but it was too far away for them to make out who or what they were. They stood near the base of the pyramid, looking back at the Greencloaks for a while, then turned and disappeared somewhere inside the structure.

“There must be a boat or something hidden somewhere along here,” said Abeke. “Over there, the crater wall looks different. . . .”

“Yes, I see it,” said Tarik. About a hundred yards away, there was a stretch of the crater wall that looked smooth, as if the stone had been worked. “Let’s go take a look.”

It was clear the crater rim wall had been not only smoothed but also deeply carved with an intricate design. In it, an elephant wading through a river or lake raised its trunk to spray water in the air.

“Subtle,” said Rollan. “I think we’ve definitely found the Lake of the Elephant.”

“It might be more than that,” said Meilin. She moved closer to the stone and ran her fingers along the carved lines. “Some of these are cut much deeper. . . . I wonder.”

She stepped back to get a wider view, her eyes following the deep marks, which were darker on the stone.

“There’s a door,” she said. “Look, follow the deep lines. They go up that leg, across the body, down the back leg, and then along the lake. And there’s a line in the middle as well. It’s a rectangle cut in the middle. Double doors!”

“Maybe,” said Conor, scratching his head. “Tight-fitting doors, if they are. How do you get them open?”

“I don’t know that,” replied Meilin. “Yet.”

“Secret doors are often activated by pushing or pulling something,” said Tarik. “Well-spotted, Meilin.”

“What about its eye?” said Conor. “That sticks out a lot more than anything else. We could try to push it in.”

“I could jump up and kick it,” said Abeke.

“Wait!” said Rollan. “There might be a trap. Maybe the eye is too obvious. We should try and poke it with a stick from the side, not from in front.”

“I could do that with my staff,” said Meilin. “If I stand over here . . .”

“Everyone, get well back,” said Tarik.

Meilin waited until they were all clear, then climbed up near the elephant carving. She leaned across and extended her staff as far as she could, until it pressed against the eye. It moved, depressing several inches.

There was a loud click and a dozen arrows shot out from holes disguised in the carving. If Abeke had jumped to kick the eyeball, she would have been hit for sure.

“I guess Dinesh really doesn’t want visitors,” said Rollan.

“If it’s not the eye, then what else could trigger it to open?” mused Abeke. She walked in front of the door and looked again.

But nothing else was immediately obvious, not until Lumeo suddenly straightened up on Tarik’s shoulder and chattered something in his ear.

“Of course,” said Tarik. He pointed to a tiny carving, smaller than his thumb, in the water the elephant was standing in, just near its tail. “A boat!”

“Looks more like a banana gourd,” said Rollan. “Or a squashed insect.”

“Those are oars, not legs,” said Conor. “It is a boat.”

“I can probably press it from the other side,” said Meilin.

She scrambled up the crater wall on the right-hand side of the carving. Rollan went with her, while everyone else retreated to what they hoped were safe positions.

The staff was extended. It was a long reach, and the staff was heavy. Despite her best efforts and Rollan’s encouragement, Meilin couldn’t stop the end from waving around so much that she couldn’t touch the tiny boat.

“Jhi!” she called. “Come and help me!”

The panda ambled over and sat down below Meilin. Meilin took a deep breath in and out, and grew still all over. Rollan had never seen her look so . . . not relaxed, but rather composed, as though all the drive and urgency had left her for a moment, leaving her at a still point he could only envy.

With perfect focus, Meilin reached out once more with her staff. It was steady in her hands and she guided it exactly onto the tiny carving of the boat.

A deep rumbling sounded inside the crater wall. Dust fell from the elephant carving, and the two halves of the door slowly lowered forward, like a drawbridge opening.

“Wait!” cautioned Tarik as Conor moved to go inside.

A forty-foot-long boat came rolling out, propelled by hidden mechanisms within the cave. It was made of tightly woven reeds, with its long mast lying flat along its length and oars shipped, mounted on a carriage that ran across the lowered bridge toward the lake.

Rollan dropped down the crater wall and ran after it, grabbing at the ropes that trailed behind to bring it to a stop before it hit the water and drifted off without them.



THE ISLAND PYRAMID

ONCE ROLLAN HAD CAUGHT THE BOAT AND THE OTHERS HAD helped pull it back up the shore, it was easy to get it in the water and climb aboard. Everyone was very careful to climb in over the stern and not step into the water, which made it a little difficult to push the craft off the shore. Once on the lake, the lightness of its construction and lack of a keel also meant the boat was easily caught by the wind, so it needed four of them rowing all the time just to keep it going roughly toward the island. As the oars dipped in and out of the water, snakeheads snapped at them.

“There is a strong current,” said Tarik, who was managing the steering oar. He looked around the crater rim. “There must be a river coming in somewhere.”

“There,” said Rollan, pointing. He was acting as a lookout in the bow, while the others rowed. There was a patch of darkness low on the northern crater wall. Essix, on his shoulder, shrieked in confirmation.

“Another way in,” said Tarik thoughtfully. “For things like crocodiles.”

“At least we got here first,” said Meilin.

“Maybe we can get the talisman and be gone before Zerif and the Conquerors even work out where we are,” said Conor.

“Their seer is very powerful,” said Abeke, looking around her. “Getting in and out unhindered might be too much to hope for.”

“Uh, those big-headed people are coming out of the pyramid again,” said Rollan, sounding as nervous as Abeke felt. “Oh, they’ve got elephant heads! Wait, that can’t be right. . . .”

“Don’t stop rowing!” called Tarik as everyone turned around to look. “They’re just masks.”

“Um, they’ve got bows,” said Rollan. “We’ll be in range very soon.”

“Abeke, Lishay, take up your bows,” said Tarik.

“I only have three arrows left,” said Abeke. “One of them is bent.”

“I have five,” said Lishay.

“There are twenty of the elephant heads,” said Rollan. “They’ve all got bows. . . . *They’re nocking arrows!*”

“Rowers, backwater!” said Tarik. “We’ll try to parley with them. Rollan, take the steering oar.”

Tarik and Rollan swapped ends, Tarik putting one foot up on the boat’s elephant figurehead, one of the only wooden parts of the reed ship. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

“We are Greencloaks, come to visit Dinesh!”

One of the elephant heads took off a mask, revealing a middle-aged woman with gray-painted skin.

“The elephant does not want visitors! Turn back!”

“We must see Dinesh!” shouted Tarik. “It is of vital importance!”

“Turn back!” shouted the woman. “We will shoot!”

“If you shoot, we must fight you!” roared Tarik. “We don’t want that. We are Greencloaks, we are Marked, and we have spirit animals! You will all be killed.”

“Turn back!”

“No! We must talk to Dinesh!”

The woman put her elephant head back on and lowered her arm. Immediately, the others fired, arrows arcing toward the boat.

“Backwater!” ordered Tarik. He stood where he was, watching the flight of the arrows. When they reached the peak of their trajectory, he drew his sword, ready to cut the projectiles from the air. But he didn’t need to, as they fell short.

“Abeke, shoot at the one who spoke,” said Tarik. “Aim for the legs. . . . We don’t want to kill anyone unnecessarily.”

Abeke and Lishay stood by the rail, bending their knees to compensate for the slight roll of the boat.

“Left leg for me,” said Lishay. “Below the knee.”

“I’ll try for her right,” said Abeke, aiming carefully.

They shot at the same time, their arrows flying in a much flatter arc than the elephant-head arrows. A loud scream announced they had hit something, and a moment later the spokeswoman fell to the ground. Four other elephant heads hastily dropped their bows and picked her up, carrying her inside the pyramid.

“And then there were fifteen,” said Conor.

Tarik cupped his hands and shouted again. “We don’t want to fight you! Let us land and speak to Dinesh!”

The only answer was another shower of arrows. Tarik chopped two of them out of the air, and Meilin deflected another with her quarterstaff.

“Shoot two more in the legs,” sighed Tarik. “If only they had some sense!”

“They don’t know who we are,” said Meilin. “They probably think we’re the Conquerors.”

“A half-dozen people in a raft?” said Rollan. “Though I suppose we could be scouts. . . .”

Abeke and Lishay shot again. This time, six people helped each of the wounded inside, leaving only three archers behind. They bravely stood their ground, until Lishay and Abeke began to draw their bowstrings back. Then they made the sensible decision to retreat inside before any more arrows could be loosed in their direction.

“Quickly, row in before they come back with reinforcements,” said Tarik.

“Their range is short because their bows are inferior,” said Lishay. “Do not assume that these are their only weapons.”

“All we have to do is talk to them,” said Abeke. She hadn’t liked firing at people who couldn’t hit her back. “I am sure they will see reason.”

“Who are they?” asked Conor.

“Priests, I would guess,” said Tarik. “Serving Dinesh as a divine being. It has happened often with the Great Beasts, although they don’t encourage it, usually.”

There was a wooden quay on the island, in front of the pyramid. They moored the boat there and went ashore cautiously, weapons ready. But no elephant heads remained in view, and the huge bronze doors at the foot of the pyramid were firmly closed.

Rollan sent Essix to fly around and see if there was another way in, while Tarik knocked firmly on the huge door.

“We are Greencloaks,” he called out, “here to see Dinesh! We mean no harm!”

There was no answer, and the huge doors did not open.

“Didn’t we just shoot three of them?” said Rollan. “No wonder they don’t want to talk to . . . uh, wait.”

Essix had swooped back and circled once over his head, before taking off again.

“Something about the top of the pyramid,” said Rollan. “I think maybe Essix has found another way in!”

“Well done.” Tarik started to climb up, followed by Meilin, Abeke, Rollan, and Conor, with Lishay at the rear, all but Rollan with their spirit animals dormant. The pyramid was built in a series

of steps or tiers, each one about four feet high. It was difficult, but not impossible, for Abeke to haul herself up onto the next level. There were thirty-nine steps, Abeke calculated. Not too many to wear Rollan out in his recovering state, she hoped. On the fourth step he faltered, and Conor reached down a hand to help him. Rollan took it, nodding in gratitude.

Tarik was on the fifteenth step when he stopped for a rest and looked out across the lake.

“Look! Over there!”

There were dark shapes in the clear waters of the lake, coming out at the spot where the underground river flowed in. Dozens and dozens of them, massive things under the water.

“Crocodiles!” said Abeke. “The Conquerors must be using them to attack! But surely the snakeheads will —”

She faltered, seeing sudden flurries in the water. Smaller darting shapes were attacking the larger ones, sending up a frothy spray tinged with pink. But they didn’t last long. The crocodiles could kill several snakeheads with one snap of their jaws, and the sharp teeth of the carnivorous fish had trouble penetrating the crocs’ armored hides. A few of the smaller ones floated dead to the surface, but plenty more snakeheads kept on coming, pushing through the mashed-up remains of hundreds of others. It was telling that the crocs were so affected by the Bile that they didn’t stop to eat the dead fish.

“There are people on the crater wall,” said Rollan. “Soldiers.”

“And spirit animals!” said Conor, shielding his eyes. “It looks like the Conquerors.”

Abeke could just make out lines of soldiers who were throwing ropes down the sides of the inner crater wall. “But how did they find this place?”

Meilin shook her head.

“I don’t know. I think they’re the same ones I saw attacking my father, but to get here so quickly . . . They must have come the same way I did, through the Maze!”

“I hope Essix really has found a way into the temple,” said Tarik grimly. “Come on!”

They raced to the top now, helping each other up. But when at last they reached the summit and the base of the dome they found there, there was no obvious door. Just the dome, which appeared to be one huge boulder of pitted gray stone, much, much larger than any of the blocks that had built the rest of the pyramid. It towered over them, covered with strange sweeping marks and lines, almost like a map of the world.

“Are you pulling our legs, Essix?” chided Rollan. “If the entrance is *under* that thing, we’re never going to —”

Essix’s retort was indignant from where she circled the dome above them.

“I don’t get it,” said Rollan to the others, looking apologetic on behalf of his spirit animal. “I’m sure she’s telling us that the way in is right here, somewhere.”

“We need to find it soon,” said Meilin. “Those crocs are halfway across the lake, and they’re big enough to climb up here!”

“Maybe Briggan can find a way,” said Conor. He called the wolf, who appeared in a flash of light. He immediately went to the huge boulder, sniffed it, and sat down.

“Briggan says it’s here too,” said Conor, mystified. “I mean, that’s not it exactly, it’s more a kind of sense of having arrived where we wanted to go. . . .”

He moved back from the dome and looked at it speculatively. Rollan joined him, Essix still calling out what sounded like falcon for bad words above his head. Abeke called Uraza, who looked up at her in puzzlement, as though not understanding why the humans couldn’t see something obvious.

“So show us,” Abeke said. “What are we missing?”

Uraza loped forward until she was directly in front of the dome. Raising both front paws, she raked her claws down the side of the stone. Sparks danced from the stone, and a faint curl of what looked like smoke.

There came a great rumble that shook the entire pyramid, and a flurry of movement as everyone jumped, dropped, or half fell onto the next step down. Uraza backed hastily away, and looked up expectantly.

Another booby trap, thought Abeke. What if the dome were to collapse, destroying the temple they were standing on? She scrambled backward so quickly she fell over. When she tried to stand, Uraza coiled through her legs, making her fall over again.

She stared upward in horror, then amazement, as the huge boulder slowly rose above her and began to uncurl, the mysterious lines in its stone flank widening and becoming the gap between limbs and an enormous body. First there was a questing trunk, as long as the trunk of the mightiest tree in the jungle, then one massive foot, and then another, planting themselves firmly on the highest step of the pyramid, and *lifting*.

Suddenly a massive elephant was standing above them, making everything below seem small.

With thundering steps, it shifted position so its fierce eyes could look down on the Greencloaks from above. Tusks that were easily twelve yards long and looked very sharp swayed from side to side, hissing through the air.

“What do I have to do to be left alone?!” roared Dinesh the Elephant.



DINESH

MEILIN WAS THE FIRST TO FIND HER VOICE. ROLLAN'S THROAT was closed tight, not just by the dust Dinesh's appearance had raised, but by the fear of being crushed under one of those terrible feet. Or skewered on a tusk . . . or swept in by that mighty trunk and swallowed whole.

"We do not disturb your rest lightly," Meilin said with a deep bow. "The crocodiles are creatures poisoned by the Conquerors, who serve the new Devourer. We are ambassadors from the Greencloaks, companions of the Four Fallen, and we need your help!"

With that, she released Jhi onto the step beside her. Leopard and wolf loped to join the panda, while falcon swooped low overhead, and then screeched away.

Dinesh leaned down, an unnerving action given his enormous size. The pyramid groaned under his weight. Rollan was sure he felt the stones shifting beneath his feet.

"Yes, I see Jhi is your companion; and there is Uraza, who woke me from my quiet contemplation; and Essix, aloof as ever; and Briggan, wanting to bite someone, no doubt. . . . I have not missed them. They are small, but I suppose they might grow."

"Time is short, Dinesh," said Tarik. "We are beset upon by not only crocodiles but also an army, with many spirit animals. They will take rather than talk."

"Take? Take what?"

"Your talisman, Dinesh," said Rollan, finding his voice. "The Slate Elephant."

"I see," rumbled Dinesh. "That would not be easily taken. It is what you have also come for, is it not?"

“It is,” said Abeke. “We need it, to fight the Devourer.”

“You say the Devourer has also come again?” asked Dinesh. “Are Kovo and Gerathon released from their prisons?”

“We do not know,” said Tarik. “But the enemy has overrun many lands, and agents of the Devourer seek all the talismans. They have the Iron Boar already.”

“And you have the Granite Ram,” said Dinesh, his eyes bright on Abeke, as if he could sense the talisman on her.

“We need your talisman desperately,” said Conor. “If you give it to us, we might still be able to —”

“Get away from these crocodiles and soldiers?” asked Dinesh.

“Use it to fight them,” said Abeke.

“Ah, I misjudged you,” said Dinesh. The huge elephant sighed and looked out at the approaching crocodiles and the northern crater wall, which was now swarming with soldiers. There were rope ladders all along the crater rim, and many ropes. There were also boats being lowered: long, light canoes that must have been carried for miles through the Great Bamboo Maze, and then the jungle.

“Will you give us your talisman?” asked Conor quietly.

The elephant shifted with a sound of rock grinding against rock.

“It is no small thing you ask,” he said. “The Great Beasts and our talismans, we are two sides of one thing, fruit of the same tree. . . . To give up our talismans is to give up something of ourselves. But then I suppose we must all face the time for change, when it comes, in our different ways. Even when we try to escape it, like Suka in her tomb of ice. Though in her case, I am not sure avoidance was her intention.”

“Suka the Polar Bear?” asked Tarik. “She is entombed in ice?”

“Yes. At least, that was the last I heard of her. I have not kept up with my fellows. I have not kept up with the world.”

“Now the world is coming to you, whether you like it or not,” said Rollan. “In about five minutes, there are going to be hundreds of those Bile creatures swarming up here, and an army of enemies not long after that. So are you going to give us the Slate Elephant or not?”

“I will let fate choose for me,” mused Dinesh. “Let us see who is alive by the end of the day. But I am inclined to help you at least a little. I will tell the people who have decided to be my priests to fight with you, to make it a little less one-sided.”

The massive elephant stood up on his hind legs, an incredible sight. He lifted his trunk and trumpeted a call that echoed across the crater, and probably for miles beyond. Then he curled up

again at the top of the pyramid, his skin darkening and turning to stone, and once more became a giant impenetrable dome.

But his trumpet call still echoed around the crater, or so it seemed, until the listeners realized they were hearing answering calls as well. Faint horn blasts came from the narrow path between the cliffs, accompanied by the clash of Zhongese gongs.

But the Greencloaks had no time to wonder what this meant. They were jumping down the pyramid, running for the great bronze gate even as the first of the Bile-grown crocodiles came sliding ashore.

Rollan lagged slightly behind, still feeling winded from the ascent. He could see three waves converging on the same spot: him and the others, with their spirit animals; the crocodiles, whipping through the water with powerful swishes of their Bile-fueled tails; and Dinesh's priests. He worried that the crocodiles would reach the gate before anyone else, but it was the Greencloaks who got there first, turning at the last moment to face their enemies. Tarik's and Lishay's spirit animals exploded out to join them, ready for combat.

Dinesh's priests rushed forward to stand at their sides. The priests were now clad in chain mail. Their bulbous paper elephant heads had been replaced by sleek steel helmets with thin, daggerlike tusks. They carried long spears and swords, and pointed knives hung from their belts. With a series of brisk commands, they arrayed themselves in front of the gates, smoothly assimilating the Greencloaks into their defensive wall.

The first wave of crocodiles struck in a fury of muscle and teeth. Most went down quickly: spitted on spears, stabbed by Tarik's sword, and shot with elephant priests' arrows snatched up by Abeke and Lishay. Those that got through were chopped with Conor's ax, bitten by Briggan, and stabbed in the eyes by Rollan. Uraza and Zhosur prowled the fringes of the battle, savaging anything that survived.

Despite this, one particularly large croc almost managed to get past the defenders, only to be distracted by Lumeo, snapping after the otter so wildly it almost tied itself in a knot. As it tried to disentangle its tail from its legs, Conor's ax came down on its head.

The second wave was only minutes behind, but it gave Tarik a brief time to organize the defenses. "Shut the gates!" he commanded, throwing himself against one of the massive bronze doors. It slowly groaned forward, until he was joined by half a dozen elephant priests who pushed it swiftly closed. Clanging shut, huge locking bars automatically fell into position.

"Are there arrow ports?" asked Tarik.

"Yes," said a tall priest, sliding back several panels at chest height.

“Lishay, Abeke, shoot through those,” said Tarik. He looked around the huge central chamber. There were at least forty armed and armored elephant priests there, but another dozen or so were still in their gray robes, gathered around a huge bronze wheel that stuck out of the far wall.

“What’s that wheel?”

“It opens the water gate,” said one of the unhelmeted priests. He looked younger than most of the others, and seemed more alert, less confused by the sudden change in what must have been a quiet and orderly existence up until that day. “To drain the lake.”

“How quickly does it do that?” asked Tarik.

“We do not know,” said the priest. “It’s a defense of last resort. It has never been done before.”

“If it’s fast enough, it will take the enemy’s boats away,” said Conor. “Suck them under!”

Tarik nodded. “Is there anywhere to see out from above? We need to know if the Conquerors have launched their boats.”

The priest pointed to a stairway on the left.

“There are disguised viewing ports at every step,” he said. “But once opened, they might be spotted from outside.”

“Rollan, go see what the enemy is doing,” said Tarik.

Rollan hurried up the stairs as the bronze doors rang out with the sudden impact of massive crocodiles throwing themselves against the gate. Conor came with him. Abeke and Lishay began to shoot steadily through the arrow ports, taking careful aim with each shot. Without being asked, elephant priests brought them quivers full of new arrows.

Rollan was panting by the time he reached the fourth level. Conor joined him at the viewing port, and together they squinted out across the lake.

Neither of them needed Essix’s falcon sight to take stock of the forces arrayed below.

“They’re on the lake!” Conor called back down, since Rollan was still breathless. “And there’s a huge — I mean really huge — crocodile driving the other ones ahead of it!”

“The Devourer himself must be here,” they heard Tarik say. Someone gasped.

“If we could defeat him . . .” said Conor. “That might finish the war right here!”

Rollan blinked at his friend. It seemed to him a bit optimistic, when they were outnumbered a thousand to one, with a truly giant crocodile on the warpath and who knew what other Bile-created spirit animals.

They hurried back down the steps to ground level, where the very same conversation was taking place.

“Did you see anyone coming through the cliff path?” Meilin asked Rollan and Conor. “Rhino riders or Zhongese forces?”

“No,” said Rollan, panting. “Just thousands and thousands of Conquerors, swarming over the crater wall, with hundreds of boats.”

“Are there many on the water already?” asked Tarik.

“A third, maybe more,” said Conor.

“Open the water gate!” commanded Tarik.

The priests at the huge bronze wheel gripped it and tried to turn it, some pulling and some pushing. But it refused to budge.

The gate rang out again, the bars groaning as they held against another attack by enraged crocodiles.

“They’re throwing themselves at the gate in a frenzy. They’re totally mad!” shouted Abeke, taking up another arrow and firing it. “I’ve shot this one a dozen times, and it’s still attacking!”

“Everyone but Abeke and Lishay to the wheel!” ordered Tarik. “You priests, stand back!”

Conor and Briggan, Rollan and Essix, Meilin and Jhi, and Tarik and Lumeo raced over to the huge wheel.

“Take hold, and call upon the strength of your spirit animal!” said Tarik.

Everyone heaved, but the wheel still wouldn’t budge. Behind them, the huge doors rang again as the crocodiles rammed into it, this time with an alarming cracking sound from the bars that held it closed.

“The gate’s breaking!” shouted Lishay.

“Heave!”

The wheel still did not move.

“Jhi! Help me!” called out Meilin.

Jhi lumbered up onto her hind legs and ponderously approached the wheel, laying her paws down on one of the thick spokes. Rollan had heard about the strength the panda had displayed in the Great Bamboo Maze, but he had never seen it in action.

“Everyone, *now!*” called out Meilin. Rollan shut his eyes and pushed against the wheel with all his strength, as everyone around him exerted every scrap of muscle and determination.

There was a sound like gravel crunching as the rust that had locked the wheel in place disintegrated. It started to move, slowly at first, and then more swiftly, until it was spinning almost of its own accord.

“Rollan, go and see if this has done anything!” ordered Tarik. As he spoke, one of the bars that held the gate splintered and broke, leaving only one beam of wood holding the doors shut. “Everyone else, prepare to receive the enemy!”

Abeke and Lishay jumped aside as the last bar snapped. A hideous, red-eyed crocodile charged through the gap, and was immediately set upon by elephant priests with their spears. More crocs came behind, sending the bronze doors crashing open. They were met by a charge from Tarik and the others. The inside of the pyramid was a vicious battle with everyone screaming, and crocs smashing into stone in their frenzy.

Rollan ran back up the stairs, calling Essix's name. He didn't stop to look out through any of the lower view ports, racing up to the eighth step, which he knew would give an even better view over the lake. Hastily sliding it open, he looked out.

The enemy armada was halfway across the lake, heading toward the island. Hundreds of canoe-like boats were already on the water, with at least as many being launched.

He couldn't see the giant crocodile, though, which was alarming. And there didn't appear to be anything happening to the lake, at least not on the northern side.

Rollan shut the port and ran around the walkway to the eastern side. He looked out. Their only chance was if a strong enough current sucked the boats down and took the soldiers and their spirit animals with them.

Again, there was nothing. Rollan ran to the southern side. Essix screeched above his head and plummeted down into view, landing several feet short of the view port. Rollan felt a now-familiar rush of falcon sight that brought him too many details of the approaching horde, but still no sign of the Devourer.

There was something else, though. Something on the pyramid at Essix's feet, just outside the viewing port. The stone there was a slightly different color from all the other blocks that made up the pyramid. It was a darker gray, actually closer to the real color of Dinesh than the rest of the pyramid, and there was something carved on the surface.

Rollan reached through the viewing port and brushed the stone, Essix closely watching his every move. There was a small elephant the size of his palm carved into the gray stone. He traced it with his finger and, perhaps with too much daring, pushed against it.

The carving popped out. There was a small gray elephant with a golden chain connected to its back.

It was the Slate Elephant. The talisman!

Rollan's hand closed to pick it up, his thoughts racing. Now that they had it, they could try to escape, take the reed boat and run for the path through the cliff. They might make it . . . though it would be incredibly risky, even with the talisman.

Dinesh's talisman. He hadn't given it to them. Rollan had found it. Taking it now would be stealing, and did Rollan really want a giant angry elephant coming after him to get it back?

He had stolen things in Concorba; he'd had to simply in order to survive. But he didn't think of himself as a thief. He'd had a code that had stopped him going down a path that led many orphans just like him to becoming hardened criminals, or worse. *Never take from the poor, never from the sick, and never if there was a better way.* Didn't that apply here too? Wouldn't it be better to earn it rather than take it?

His fingers itched. Dinesh was so powerful. Imagine what his talisman could do!

Slowly, not at all certain he wasn't being a complete idiot, not daring to imagine what Meilin might say if she found out, Rollan pushed the tiny elephant back in place.

As it locked home, he heard a voice in his head.

Good, said Dinesh. If you had taken the talisman against my will, you would be my enemy. Since you have given it back, I will be your friend.

Essix nodded approvingly and Rollan sagged in relief.

"Uh, thanks," said Rollan, though he wasn't sure if Dinesh could hear him or if this mental speech only went one way. "How about being real friendly and helping us *right now*?"

There was no response. Essix launched into air and flew to the next port. He ran after her and threw the cover open.

Looking out, this time he was rewarded with a much better view. A circular hole had opened in the southern crater wall, a hole he estimated to be about fifty feet in diameter, though most of it was underwater. Water roiled and frothed near it, and a whirlpool was forming, showing that the lake was emptying out. But it wasn't emptying *fast* enough. The current wouldn't be strong enough to sweep the invading army away.

Help is coming, said Dinesh. Look to the west.

LAST STAND

CONOR STEPPED BACK FROM THE BATTLEGROUND, WIPING HIS ax on his tunic as he recovered his breath. The crocodiles in the first two waves had all been killed. Greencloaks and elephant priests stood somberly among the carnage, checking weapons and wounds. Meilin helped bandage a badly bitten priest, with Jhi gently licking at the wound.

“We cannot hold here with the gates broken like this,” said Tarik to Lishay, who was cleaning some recovered arrows. “We will have to make a stand on the pyramid above, or run for the boat, if the lake is not emptying too fast.”

“We can’t all fit on the boat,” said Conor with a worried glance at the priests. After their awkward start approaching the island, they had fought well together. The priests didn’t deserve to be left behind.

But if they *didn’t* take the boat, they might all die here. The Conquerors would win, and the world of Erdas would be lost to the Devourer.

Rollan came racing down the stairs, completely winded.

“The lake *is* emptying,” he panted. “But not fast enough. Enemy boats are halfway across —” He paused to suck in a breath. “But there is good news. Rhino riders are coming down the cliff path! And there are Zhongese soldiers too, under silver and crimson banners!”

“Silver and crimson!” exclaimed Meilin. “My father!”

“I cannot think what would have brought them,” said Tarik. “But now we have a chance.”

“Xue,” said Conor. “I’ll bet she called them.”

“Did you see the Devourer?” asked Tarik. “Or his giant crocodile?”

Rollan shook his head.

“How far away are the boats?”

“About ten minutes,” said Rollan. “But some were already turning aside to go back to shore, to prepare for the rhino riders’ attack.”

“We’d better go and have a look,” said Tarik. “Stay close and be ready to retreat back here.”

“Essix . . . says that the way is clear,” said Rollan, his gaze turning distant. “If we go out now, we won’t be surprised by that giant croc.”

Conor glanced at Briggan, who was standing over a dead crocodile as though daring it to wake up, and smiled contentedly. Even if they did die in battle today, he had experienced more than he had ever dreamed of while herding sheep.

Tarik wiped his sword on his trouser leg. The others formed up behind him in a wedge. Zhosur and Uraza pounced ahead, one to either side, with Briggan stalking out in front. Jhi gave the wounded priest one last lick and entered the dormant state as a tattoo on Meilin’s arm.

Together, they walked out into the sunshine, past the broken gates and the crocodiles outside, whose heads were stuck with so many arrows they looked like bizarre oversized pincushions. Essix swooped low overhead with a shriek that made the priests start.

The great host of the Conquerors was still pouring over the crater wall, thousands of them, and it seemed nearly all had spirit animals. There were lynxes and cougars, jackals and boars, bears and hyenas — all kinds of animals swarming ahead of the soldiers. In the air above, there were bats and ravens, vultures and hawks.

The lake was filling up with boats, although none had made it to the center yet. The lake was also clearly shallower, the mark of its former level visible along the shore. But even though it was emptying, the current only sped the attackers’ boats faster toward the island.

On the western shore, the Conquerors were forming up in ranks. A mile south, rhino riders swarmed from the cliff path, each one dropping a Zhongese soldier from its back as they came out, the crimson lacquer on their armor bright as they ran into their tight formations.

But even rhino riders and Zhongese together were greatly outnumbered by the Conquerors.

“They’ll be overwhelmed,” said Meilin softly, looking at the Zhongese. Conor wondered if she was remembering the fall of Jano Rion. “We all will be. There are just too many of them.”

Conor’s heart sank. She was right. The hope that they had felt at the news of the arrival of the rhino riders and the Zhongese soldiers was ebbing away.

“If you’re going to help us,” said Rollan beside him, “now would be a very good time.”

Conor turned to stare at his friend in puzzlement. Rollan was looking away from the host, not toward it.

“Who’re you talking to?” Conor asked him.

“Uh . . . Dinesh. He owes me. I think. Or maybe he was just —”

Rollan gripped Conor’s shoulder as the island suddenly jolted beneath them.

“What was that?” Conor looked down at the ground. It felt like an earthquake.

“Look!” Rollan was pointing up at the dome. It seemed to be rising higher above the top of the pyramid, as though Dinesh was stirring again.

Then Conor saw that the massive blocks in front of the dome were being pushed aside, as though the dome were the top of a giant sphere . . . a sphere that was starting to roll —

“Run!” shrieked Rollan. “Run left!”

Everyone turned around and saw the now massively unbalanced sphere. It was almost half the size of the pyramid itself and still moving forward, pushing through the stone blocks as though they were a child’s bricks.

It was about to burst free and roll down the remaining steps of the pyramid onto them.

The ground shook violently as it crushed down the first step, grinding the stone into a ramp. The Greencloaks and elephant priests fled toward the edge of the island. The boulder smashed down several more steps, straightening its path, and seeming to grow bigger as it approached. It was at least a hundred feet in diameter. Conor didn’t remember Dinesh being *that* big.

Halfway down the pyramid, the massive boulder bounced into the air and came crashing down with a thud that knocked everyone off their feet. Then it bounced again.

It rose high in the air, higher than any stone could normally bounce, and grew once more. Conor gaped as it soared overhead, impossibly high and huge at the same time. It was now the size of a tiny moon, a vast ball of stone that tumbled as it fell — straight at the enemy’s fleet.

The boulder struck the surface of the lake with incredible force, blowing most of the remaining water out of the lake in a single titanic splash. Boats, soldiers, spirit animals, crocodiles, everything exploded up into the air before coming down again in a torrent.

Conor lay on the ground, shielding his head. He held his breath as water cascaded down all around them. A wave smashed against the island, its wash spreading all the way to the pyramid. But it was weaker than it might have been. Most of the water had gone up in the air.

Conor was the first to stand up. He looked around anxiously for Briggan, fear stabbing at his heart. Then he saw him, crouching with the big cats, teeth bared. He shook all over, sending spray everywhere. The other spirit animals were all right, even Essix. The falcon was a black speck high above.

Something flopped at Conor's feet. It was a snakehead, trying to bite him even as it gasped in the open air. He put it out of its misery with a quick stroke of his ax.

From nearby came the trumpeting cry of an elephant.

"Look!" cried Rollan, pointing.

The lake was now dry, the rocky bed exposed, covered in wounded Conquerors and smashed boats. Right in the middle, the massive boulder that had caused the deluge uncurled, and there was Dinesh the Elephant. He raised his trunk and trumpeted another war cry, but there were no enemies nearby to attack.

Conor raised his ax above his head, but not in triumph, not yet. Things were different on the shore. The Conquerors were advancing. Even with a good third of their number lost upon the lake, it was still a great host, marching inexorably toward the smaller forces of the rhino riders and the Zhongese resistance. The rhinos were closest to what had been the lakeshore, with the Zhongese foot soldiers forming up on the lower slopes of the crater wall.

Down in the lake bed, Dinesh trumpeted again and began to lumber across toward the forthcoming battlefield. As he moved forward, there was a great blast of horns from the rhino riders. Conor saw Jodoboda raise his lance and bring it down, and all the rhino riders charged toward the enemy, the rhinos lowering their massive, horned heads.

The Greencloaks surged forward instinctively too, sprinting over the rocky bed to join in the battle.

"Wait!" said Tarik. "We must think before we fight, and stand together. Where can we make best use of our talents?"

Conor knew where Meilin wanted to go. She was anxiously appraising the force of Zhongese resistance fighters, no doubt looking for her father.

"We might get trampled by the rhinos in a fight," he said. "It would be safer for us with General Teng."

Meilin glanced at him, as though surprised to hear him suggesting that plan. Her desire to agree was naked on her face, but with a brisk shake of her head and a hint of anguish in her eyes, she said, "My father doesn't need us. Dinesh is one against many. We should follow Dinesh and protect him."

Tarik nodded. "I agree. We follow Dinesh, and stay together!"

He ran swiftly forward, Lumeo on his shoulder, lending him speed and agility over the exposed lake bed. The others followed as best they could, watching the rhinos on the other side surging into the Conquerors, who had stopped to receive their charge, shields and spears at the ready.

The clash of so many rhinos, spirit animals, and soldiers and their weapons made a sound none of the Greencloaks had ever heard before. It was like a terrible shout of pain and anger from a metallic

throat, louder than anything.

A minute after the rhinos charged home, Dinesh joined the fray. Many Conquerors ran before him, both spirit animals and people, but some were made of sterner stuff. Soon he was surrounded and had to turn in a circle, trumpeting and crushing, picking up enemies with his trunk and hurling them back against their allies. His tusks cut like scythes through the Conqueror ranks, leaving wide swathes felled in their wake.

The rhino riders found themselves surrounded too. Their charge had taken them deep into the enemy forces, but there were too many Conquerors. They spread around and forward, cutting the rhino riders off from their allies, the Zhongese resistance fighters, on the crater wall.

In response to this, a blast of battle gongs sounded from the resistance fighters, and Conor made out a tall man at the front pointing his sword forward, catching the sunlight. Surely that was General Teng, giving the command to advance! Meilin's face lit up with pride, and Conor cheered as the well-disciplined Zhongese soldiers marched forward, pausing every ten yards or so to unleash a volley of arrows.

Then it was time for Tarik and the others to enter the fight. They had reached the confused melee behind Dinesh, and Conor gripped his ax tightly with both hands, preparing himself for battle. Beside him, Briggan barked and snapped at the air, eager to get his teeth into the enemy. On the other side of the wolf, Rollan grinned at him.

“Together, right?”

Conor grinned back. “Always.”

The sentiment was a fine one, but as they cut their way toward the elephant, almost immediately the press of battle began to force them apart.

“Pair up!” shouted Tarik as he dodged beneath the swipe of a huge soldier with a two-handed ax and cut at his arm, Lumeo dancing around below, biting at the man's hamstrings to bring him down. As the enemy soldier fell, Zhosur jumped on him and bit him in the neck, before leaping across to savage a jackal that was trying to bite Lishay.

Conor found himself back-to-back with Abeke, surrounded by enemies. They fought together as they had in the swamp, Briggan and Uraza at their sides. Conor and the two spirit animals kept the soldiers back with his ax, while Abeke coolly shot them.

“They're faltering!” shouted Tarik. “Press on!”

The Conquerors *were* beginning to waver, and many were glancing over their shoulders. The ones between the rhino riders and the Zhongese fighters began to look for ways out, and some even started to surrender, throwing down their weapons.

The battle was on a knife-edge between defeat and victory. Anything could happen in the next few seconds. The whole future might be decided in that time. Hope suddenly rose in the hearts of the defenders as the Conquerors felt their first real pangs of fear.

Then a great crocodile, even larger than the others, came out of the lake bed.

“I’ve seen that one before,” gasped Abeke, pulling an arrow out of the body of a Conqueror who had fallen at her feet.

Conor wiped sweat from his forehead. “Is it —?”

“Yes. I saw it curled in front of the throne of the Devourer.” Her expression was very fierce.

“The Devourer,” whispered Conor, and his words rang out in a sudden hush. All fighting had momentarily ceased, everyone looking at the giant crocodile in awe.

A huge man stood up on the crocodile’s back. He was armored in red mail, with a fanged helmet that hid his face.

“General Gar or not, I’ll put an arrow in him just the same,” said Abeke.

The arrival of the crocodile and its rider put new heart in the Conquerors. A cry went up and they charged forward again. The battle swirled and shifted, small groups fighting in all directions, all order crumbling into chaos.

Conor had lost sight of the other Greencloaks. He stayed close to Abeke. They fell into a rhythm that was only broken when a wolverine attacked Conor from behind while he was busy fending off a soldier. The first he knew of it was when sharp teeth fastened on his arm and shook it, wrenching the ax from his grasp. He cried out in pain and fell backward on one knee.

Briggan snarled, but Abeke was closer. She moved to strike at the wolverine with an arrow, but at the last moment turned her hand to hit it with her fist. It fell away, and she backed off with her eyes and mouth wide.

“Why’d you do that?” asked Conor, clutching his arm and feeling blood pulse under his fingers. He had seen her pull the blow, but why? He fumbled for his ax.

Abeke was looking around her. Suddenly she froze. A lean figure stepped out of the soldiers toward them, a boy not much older than them, but stronger, blonder, and whiter, even under the muck of battle. He caught sight of Abeke, and a flash of recognition went through both of them. Conor, just struggling to his feet with one hand on Briggan’s back, saw it clearly. Abeke looked shocked, her dark skin paler than he had ever seen it. The blond boy smiled and raised one hand in greeting.

Abeke was still gaping at him when another enemy soldier brought his sword down toward her head. Conor leaped forward with a yelp, and the blow was blocked by the haft of his ax — and by the thin, curved blade of a saber. Conor’s and the blond boy’s crossed weapons locked. Abeke blinked

into the present and plunged the arrow in her hand deep into the enemy soldier's chest. Briggan jumped at the wolverine, biting savagely as it whipped around to attack again.

With a squeal of steel, the blond boy slowly disengaged his sword, watching Conor the whole time.

"Reneg!" he called, and the wolverine made an odd coughing sound as it retreated.

"Shane," Abeke said.

"Abeke." The blond boy nodded sadly, but he didn't stick around to chat. He backed away and was carried off by the tide of battle.

"Who was that?" panted Conor, swinging his ax to send several enemies scuttling after the boy. "Shane who?"

"None of your business!" snapped Abeke. Her face was flushed, and she was looking at neither Conor nor the retreating boy.

"Ah," said Conor. He had wondered why Abeke had stayed with the Conquerors as long as she had. The handsome boy who had blocked his own soldier's attack to protect Abeke might be that reason.

They had some clear space around them now, with several soldiers withdrawing to follow Shane. A hundred yards away, Conor could see that Tarik, Lishay, Meilin, and Rollan had finally won their way to Dinesh. But the elephant was backing out of the combat, only striking or trampling anyone stupid enough to come after him. As Conor and Abeke pressed forward in hope of joining them, he turned.

"I judge the field to be even now, or close enough. It is for you to carry the day. Or not. I will await the victor."

With that, Dinesh tramped past them, the ground shaking as he went.

The Conquerors stood stunned for a moment as Dinesh retreated, unable to believe their luck. Then they surged forward, hundreds of them charging straight at the Greencloaks and their spirit animals, cutting off Abeke and Conor, with the giant crocodile and its rider coming up fast behind them.

A GREAT LOSS

“**B**ACK-TO-BACK!” ORDERED TARIK. MEILIN STEPPED INTO place with him, Lishay, and Rollan. Their shoulders touched for a moment, then they found themselves pushed out a little as Meilin released Jhi from her dormant state, the panda suddenly appearing between them. Jhi stood upright, like a column, and they all set their backs against her solid bulk, feeling a wave of rejuvenation radiating out from her. Lumeo crouched between Tarik’s feet, but Zhosur snarled and sprang at the first attackers, while Essix tangled in midair with half a dozen enemy birds. Only her superior speed and dexterity saved her from their frenzied attacks.

Within a minute, they were completely surrounded. Meilin whirled her staff almost too fast to be seen, letting well-practiced reflexes guide her blows. Tarik’s straight sword flashed and Lishay’s curved talwar sang as they cut and hacked at their opponents. Rollan struck with his dagger, quick as Essix falling on a bird. Essix herself dove from above, seeking vulnerable eyes and throats.

But there were too many enemies. Meilin knew it, and she was sure the others did too, although none of them said anything. There wasn’t time to talk, and nothing to say anyway. It would only be a matter of minutes before one of them was wounded or killed. This was the end.

Then the enemies around them suddenly surged back, driven away by a charge led by a snorting rhino and a rider stabbing with his lance, and a soldier splendid in crimson and silver, with a badge on his helmet and a sword that shone like liquid silver as it struck. Close behind them were soldiers and rhino riders fighting as if they had trained together for years.

Meilin knew that badge. Her heart leaped on seeing it.

“Father!” she cried.

“Jodoboda!” shouted Rollan.

General Teng saluted Meilin with his sword, then leaped back into the fight, Jodoboda and his rhino at his side. The enemy fell back before them, not expecting this last-minute resurgence. Many threw their weapons away as rhinos ran down their neighbors. The thundering of the mighty animals was as deafening as Dinesh himself.

Meilin leaned back against Jhi, watching her father fight. He was strong and efficient, a beacon of hope in her exhausted state. He kept pace with the rhinos, shouting orders. She longed to follow him, but they needed her there, just as the battle needed General Teng where he was.

Suddenly the giant crocodile and its rider raged through the line of retreating Conquerors, crushing them under clawed foot without care. Jodoboda started to turn his rhino to meet it, but he couldn't get around in time. The huge jaws closed on the rhino's neck, and it fell. Jodoboda clung to the back of his falling beast an instant too long, unwilling to accept its death. Then he let go of the chain and leaped aside. But he fell badly. One leg twisted underneath him, and he did not get up.

The crocodile pushed the dead rhino aside with its ugly snout and advanced on the wearied quartet. The man on its back drew a crescent-shaped blade from the scabbard on his chest and fainted at Tarik, who was closest. Tarik brought his sword up to block it, but the blade flew instead at Lishay, who was also leaning exhausted against Jhi.

She reacted too slowly.

Zhosur leaped even as the blade flew. It struck the tiger with a horrifying thud, sinking deep into the beast's neck. Zhosur fell to the ground at Lishay's feet. The Greencloak cried out, a terrible cry of pain and fear, and dropped to Zhosur's side, clutching the white fur in her fists. Meilin crouched next to her. Perhaps there was something Jhi could do, if they reacted quickly.

But Zhosur had already been bleeding from a dozen lesser wounds before the blade had struck him. Meilin could tell before touching him that he was already dead.

Lishay cried out again, a mournful wail of loss that broke Meilin's heart.

Tarik snarled. She had never heard the Greencloak make so animal a noise before. She looked up in surprise. He was already moving, springing forward, sword raised to strike the mammoth crocodile, but the blow never connected. The crocodile swung its huge armored head, sending him flying through the air to land in a crumpled heap. Lumeo ran after him, chittering in distress.

Meilin sprang to her feet and tried to run to his defense, but Rollan pulled her back, just as the crocodile lunged, its jaws snapping shut in the air where Meilin would have been.

“Beware!” cried a voice she knew well. Her father!

Before the crocodile could attack again, its snout was struck by a flurry of blows from General Teng. Sparks flew from its strange hide, but so did small amounts of blood.

“Meilin, get back!” ordered Teng.

His sword flashed again, knocking another thrown crescent blade aside. The crocodile snapped at him, but he bent over backward, knees bent, one hand to the ground.

The jaws closed on the empty air above him.

Rollan grabbed Meilin around the waist and yanked her away.

“Let me go!” screamed Meilin. “Father!”

She howled as she struggled to extricate herself, determined to help her father, but someone else joined in, pulling her back several steps.

“Too big to fight up close!” said a familiar voice behind her. Meilin whirled around. There was Xue, but this time she had no pack and her back was not bent. She had a sharp chopstick in each hand, and they were bloody. “Find bows, arrows!”

Meilin looked around wildly. She couldn't see any unbroken bows or arrows. But she could see Jodoboda's lance, the end dug into the ground. She ran to it and pulled it out. It was heavy but well balanced, and she was strong.

Rollan had found a bow. He was nocking an arrow too long for it, not very expertly. General Teng dodged another snap of the crocodile's jaws and struck back, causing more sparks to fly, but seemingly doing little else.

“Help me now, Jhi,” whispered Meilin. She balanced the lance on her shoulder, gripping it with both hands, and bent her knees, ready to throw it at the crocodile's nearest eye. “It's just like a really sharp piece of bamboo.”

Strength and calm flooded into her. She could feel Rollan and Xue at her back, and hear Abeke and Conor running closer, calling. Meilin ignored them all and took a deep breath, balancing carefully on both feet, the lance poised over her right shoulder, every muscle tensed and ready.

At that moment, General Teng slipped on the bloody grass. He recovered almost instantly, bringing up his sword, but not fast enough.

The crocodile's jaws closed powerfully around his body, massive teeth grinding against his armor. He grimaced in terrible pain, but made no sound at all. The sword fell from his hand as he was spat out onto the ground.

Zhongese warriors never cried out in pain. Neither did General Teng or Meilin. Even as the moment of stillness Jhi had given her crumbled under the terrible shock of seeing her father struck down, she chose to act rather than scream.

Putting aside all thought of throwing the lance, Meilin charged.

“Meilin, no!” Rollan was too slow to stop her.

So was the crocodile. It swung its head around to catch the lance in its jaws, but the attempt came too late. The lance struck the corner of its mouth, just above the lip. Driven with all of Meilin’s strength as augmented by the Great Beast Jhi, the steel lancehead drove deep into the crocodile’s jaw, inflicting a grievous wound.

But not a mortal one.

The crocodile opened its jaws to bite the impudent human who had hurt it so, only to receive Rollan’s arrow straight down its gullet. This also was only an annoyance, but its rider saw other archers running up, more Greencloaks with unnatural strength and accuracy.

The crocodile reared up, controlled by the armored man on its back.

“We *will* conquer!” hissed the crocodile’s rider. But his actions belied the threat. The crocodile turned and streaked away with astonishing speed, crashing through friends and foes alike.

At that moment, the Conquerors lost the battle. Seeing their general and his great mount retreat, they turned tail and began to flee. Rhino riders ran them down, and the Zhongese gongs began to beat out their shrill command, *Pursue, pursue, pursue!*

Meilin was aware of this only as a distant distraction. She ran to her father and knelt by his side. Blood bubbled from his lips. Impossibly, despite the crushing force of the crocodile’s jaws and its huge teeth, the general was still alive!

“Jhi! Jhi!” she called.

The panda pressed in beside her and put one paw on her father’s shattered chest. Jhi pressed lightly, then retreated.

“No,” called Meilin, reaching out to pull the panda back. “Help him!”

Jhi did not budge. She sat where she was, her stillness indicating there was nothing she could do.

“Meilin.”

It was the merest whisper. Meilin put her cheek against her father’s, tears trickling down her face.

“Father, I am here.”

“I am . . . proud of you, daughter.” The words were faint, barely audible over the clash of arms on the battlefield. “Should have told you . . . betrayed . . . the Bile . . .”

He said no more. Meilin felt her father’s face go slack under her cheek. Rising up, she saw brown eyes — eyes just like her own — now staring up into an interminable nothing.

The world around her became silent all at once. Meilin lost track of the battlefield. Everything was replaced by a soundless wail — the scream of death. It was so loud. How could they not all hear it? How did they not go mad from it?

Meilin felt Rollan put his hand on her shoulder, and Jhi moved to gently nuzzle her ear. She didn't respond to either of them. Instead, she bent over her father, and gave way to her tears.

It was not true that a Zhongese soldier never cried.

Essix, minus a few feathers, came to land nearby. Conor and Abeke arrived too, but they did not speak. Conor helped a semiconscious Tarik up, and Abeke bent down to see if Lishay was still alive. Uraza nosed at the dead Zhosur and made a small keening noise, deep in her throat.

Meilin rocked back and forth on her knees. She wanted nothing more than to fly like Essix up into the sky and far away from the battlefield. But duty remained, to Jhi and the others, to all of Erdas. The dream of flying was just that, a dream.

She wiped her eyes and stood up.

"The time of the bamboo flowering comes to all," said Xue. "It is the life we lead that matters."

Meilin nodded dumbly, unable to speak. The words were familiar. It was an ancient Zhongese saying. But she had never had them said to her before.

She and her father had come a long way from Jano Rion, thought Meilin. A very long way. Now he at least would never return.

Tarik's hand came down heavily on her shoulder, offering support, even as the battered older Greencloak took it from her as well. The battle had passed on, leaving a trail of dead, wounded, and bereft in its wake. It was strangely quiet, now that all the fighting was in the distance, and moving steadily farther away.

"We've won?" Rollan said.

"For now," said Tarik.

"Lishay's alive," called out Abeke. "But I can't rouse her."

"Do not try," said Xue to Abeke. "To lose a spirit animal is a little death. Some come back. Many do not."

Tarik closed his eyes briefly, as though this was one thing he could not bear.

"So I guess I should go and get the talisman now?" said Rollan. "I mean, in case they come back and counterattack or whatever."

"What do you mean, go and get the talisman?" asked Conor.

"Uh, yeah, that's right. I didn't tell you. It's in the temple. I found it before and . . . er . . . put it back," said Rollan.

"What?!" exclaimed Conor and Abeke in unison.

"Dinesh said that was good! That's why he helped. He said if we won, we could have it . . . so . . ."

“I wondered why Dinesh came to our aid,” said Tarik. He bent his head to Rollan. “Truly, Rollan, there’s more Greencloak in you than you acknowledge. I hope that you will choose to fully join us, after all.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Rollan. “Who would you have to lecture at about duty and honor, if I just went and joined up?”

“We’ll go get it with you,” Meilin spoke with a quiet voice. Her father’s body lay broken at her feet. She wasn’t ready to be separated from the others yet. They were all she had left.

She held out her hand. Surprised, Rollan took it, and their eyes met. Conor and Abeke hesitated, then joined their hands too, and all four of them looked at each other. They were bloody and exhausted, but they had survived their first major battle against the Devourer. Together.

Jhi watched the proceedings with her silver eyes, and glanced slyly at Briggan. The wolf grinned, his tongue hanging out. Uraza sniffed and began to wash her bloodied paws. Essix, high overhead, issued a long, piercing cry.

SLATE ELEPHANT

DINESH RECEIVED THEM AT THE BASE OF THE TUMBLEDOWN pyramid with his surviving priests. The Great Elephant, last seen bleeding from hundreds of small wounds, now appeared completely unharmed. He was also somewhat smaller. The priests wore their elephant heads again, and simple robes of gray, though many also sported bandages.

“So you have won,” said Dinesh. “And you have come to claim the Slate Elephant.”

“We’ve come to ask for it,” said Rollan diplomatically.

“And to thank you for your help,” added Abeke.

“I only did what was needed to make it a fair contest,” rumbled Dinesh. “Maybe a little more, given they had that huge cold lizard on their side.”

“Was it a Great Beast?” asked Conor. “The crocodile? Like our spirit animals were?”

“Oh, no, child,” said Dinesh. “We Great Beasts are siblings of a sort. Though it is long since I knew the doings of the others, we are all stewards of Erdas, to the last of us. Even Kovo and Gerathon, in their folly. No other creatures, great as they may become, can ever become a Great Beast. Still, that spirit animal and its rider do bear a striking resemblance. . . .”

“I am fairly sure that was General Gar,” said Abeke. “Though I couldn’t see his face.”

“There is no doubt now that the Devourer has returned,” said Tarik gravely. “As we feared.”

“Whether he is the Devourer or not, you must go from here soon,” said Dinesh. “The Conquerors have suffered a defeat, but there are many more of them coming. They have found or made a way

through the Great Bamboo Maze, and no part of Pharsit Nang is safe. They will attack again, and soon. I myself will be seeking a quieter place to continue my contemplations.”

“We’ll go back with the rhino riders to begin with, if they will take us.” Tarik turned to Jodoboda, who stood with them, his leg splinted and his arm around the shoulders of one of his riders for support. His beard was filthy, and he wore the heavy chain of his fallen rhino around his neck, as a sign of mourning.

“We will take you,” said Jodoboda. “The Zhongese resistance too. We’ve decided we will fight the Conquerors together in Pharsit Nang, just as you have counseled all this time, Old Mother,” he added to Xue. “As always, you have gotten your way!”

“You mean you found your good sense,” said Xue with a snort.

“Thanks from us too,” said Rollan to Jodoboda. “We would’ve been lost without the rhinos, and Meilin’s father . . . and your priests too, Dinesh.”

“All were needed,” said Dinesh with a heavy sigh, as though resigning himself to a loss no less painful than Meilin’s. “And all did what was needful. Go get the talisman. It is yours to wield now.”

Rollan sketched a hasty but sincere bow, and went off at a run to climb the higgledy-piggledy steps of the pyramid, Essix flying in loops over his head.

When he returned, it was to silence, the silence of exhaustion. They had won a battle and gained the Slate Elephant, but it was at a terrible cost. What would the quest for the next talisman demand of them?

“Whose talisman will you seek next?” asked Dinesh. “What Great Beast will have their solitude pierced by your grasping little voices?”

“We do not know,” said Tarik.

“Unless you want to help us again,” said Abeke. “You mentioned something about Suka being entombed in ice. Where was that exactly?”

Dinesh laughed, a deep rumble that echoed across the crater.

“Somewhere cold,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “I can say no more. Somewhere very cold.”

“That’ll make a welcome change,” said Rollan, holding up the chain with the Slate Elephant slowly circling on the end for all to see. “I’ve got it.”

“Just don’t give it away,” said Conor.

Rollan was unsure for a moment whether Conor was joking or not. But of course he was. He had to be.

“We’ve *done* that,” Rollan said. “Let’s not make that our thing.”

Uraza suddenly growled and hissed at something behind them.

Everyone turned to look. Lishay was lying on a stretcher nearby. Her wounds had been tended, but she still had not woken. Her cheeks were hollow, and her long hair was unbound.

Now, a tiger with black stripes was sitting by Lishay's head, making mewling noises and batting at her face with a velvet paw, the claws retracted.

Uraza started forward, but Abeke raised her hand, and the leopard stopped. Rollan watched in wonder.

The black tiger let out a mournful wowl and began to lick Lishay's cheek. The Greencloak turned her head and mumbled something, throwing out her arm, the fingers lightly grasping the fur on the tiger's back.

"Zhosur?" she said, slightly raising her head. Her eyes opened and she saw her slain twin brother's spirit animal. "Zhamin?"

The tiger purred and bent his head. Lishay sobbed and wrapped her arms around the tiger, which promptly vanished in a flash of light.

Lishay slowly pushed up her right sleeve and then her left, staring at the tattoos of leaping tigers, one on each forearm. The left one was a white tiger, but it was faded, as if made by a ghost. The other, vibrant and new, showed a tiger as black as a starless night.

"Never seen *that* before," said Xue.

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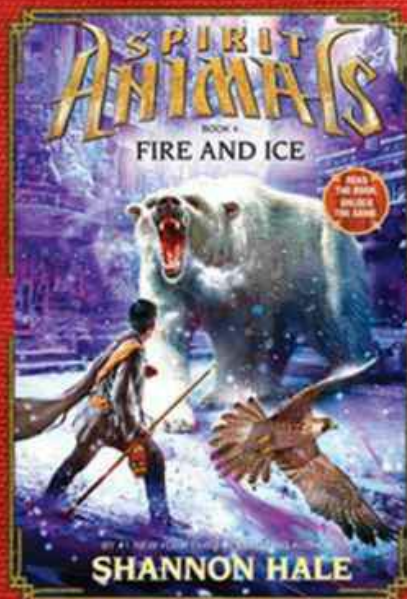
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Book Four

Fire and Ice

By Shannon Hale



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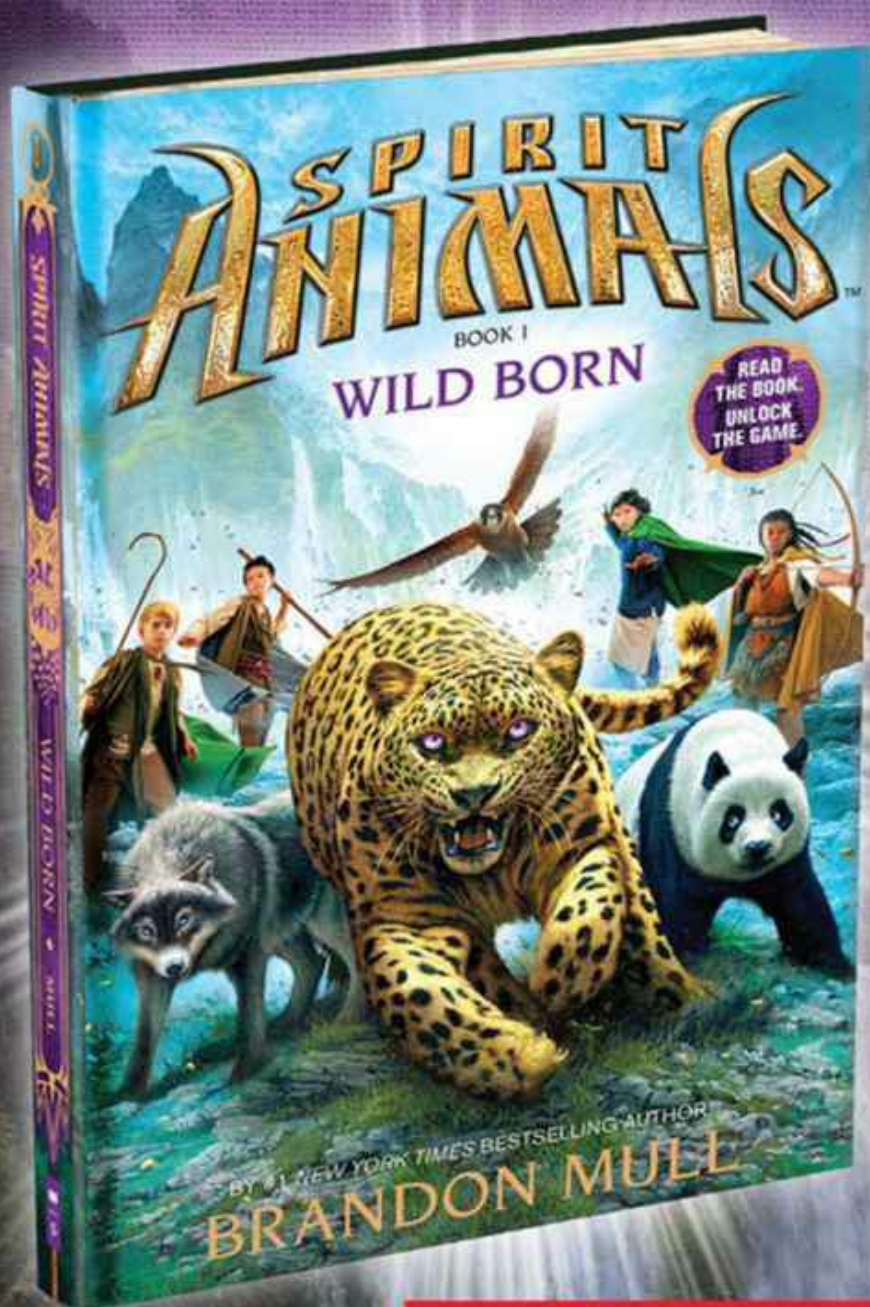
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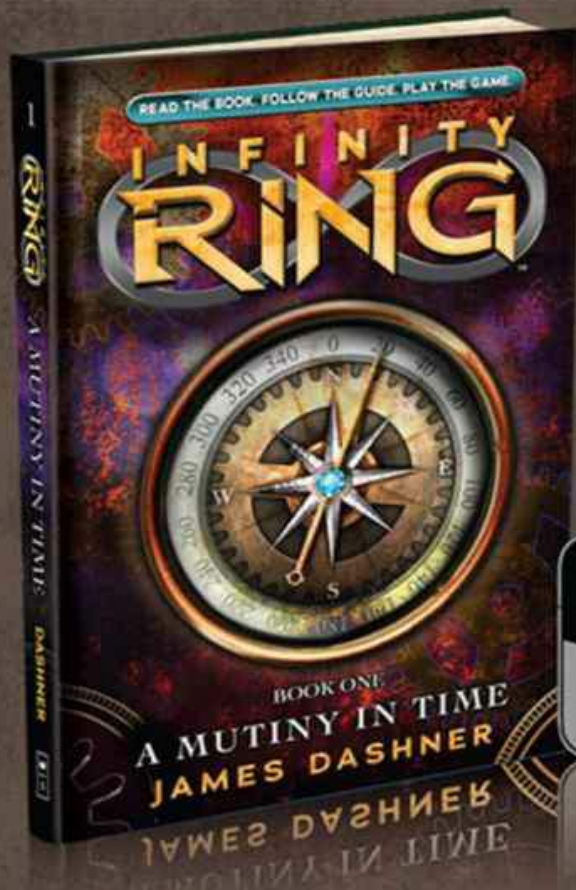
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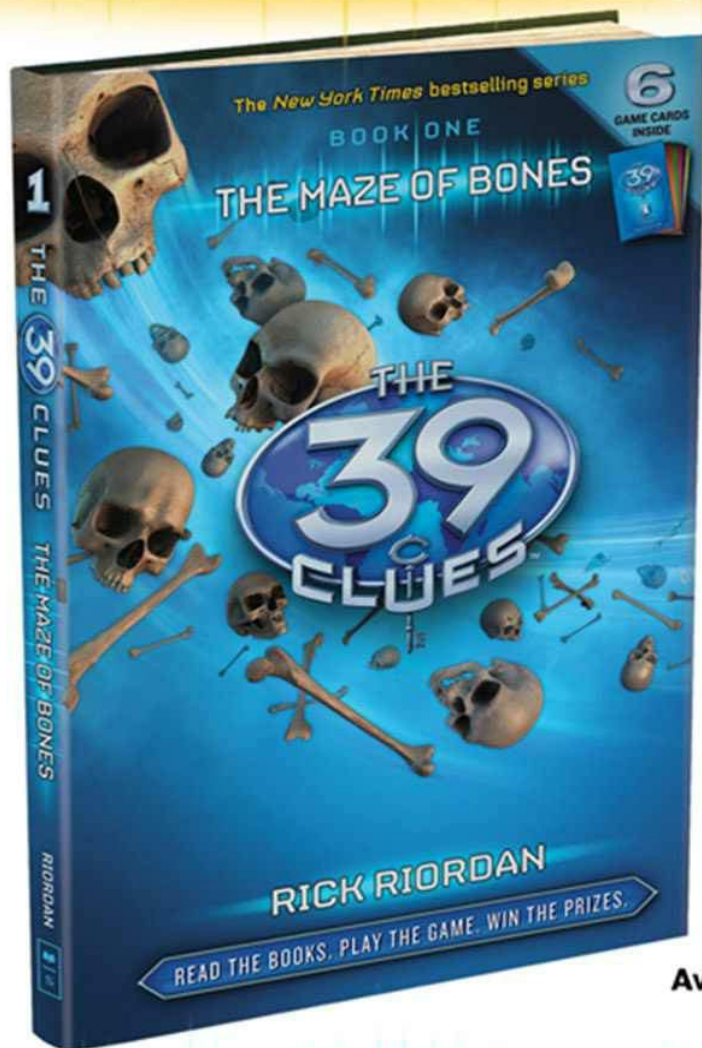
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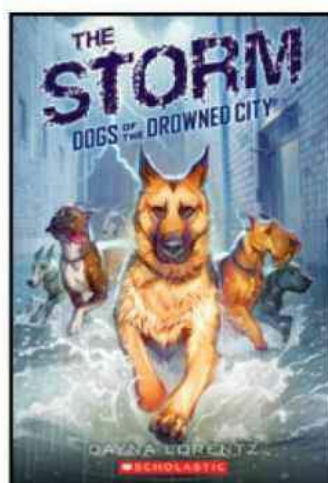
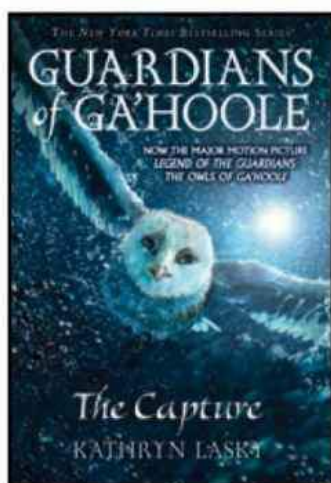
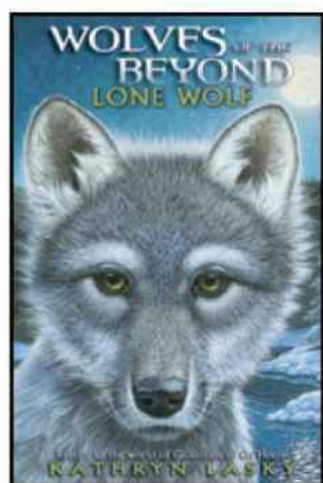
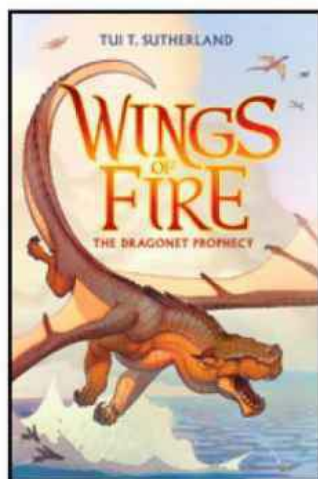
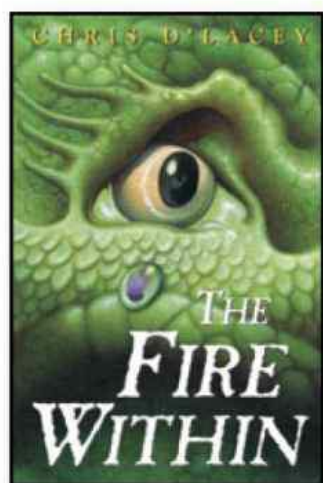
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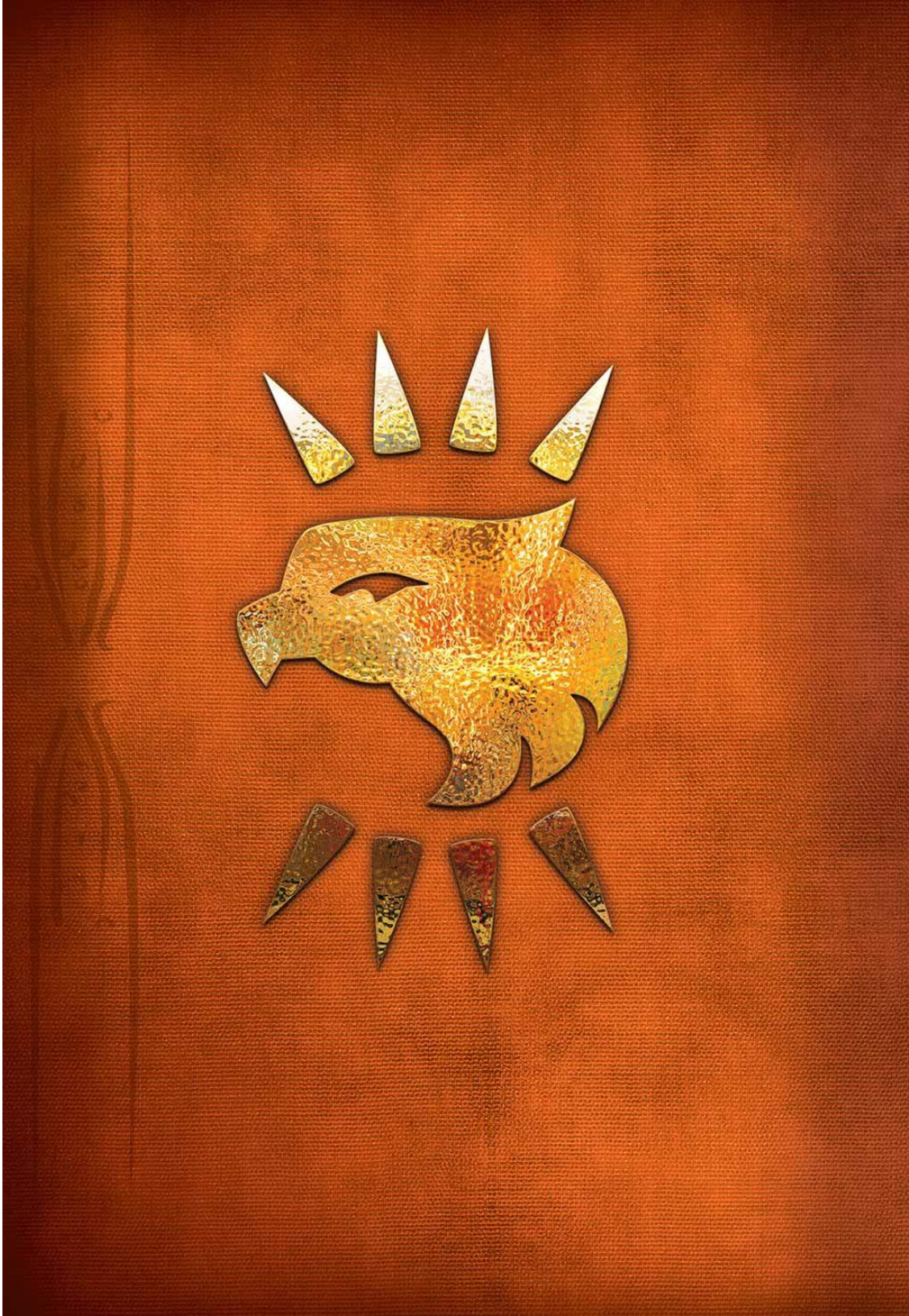
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The shudder came first. Then
ice cracking, the sound high
and piercing. The entire
ice block shattered, shards
exploding out.

The gigantic polar bear lifted
her paws and roared.



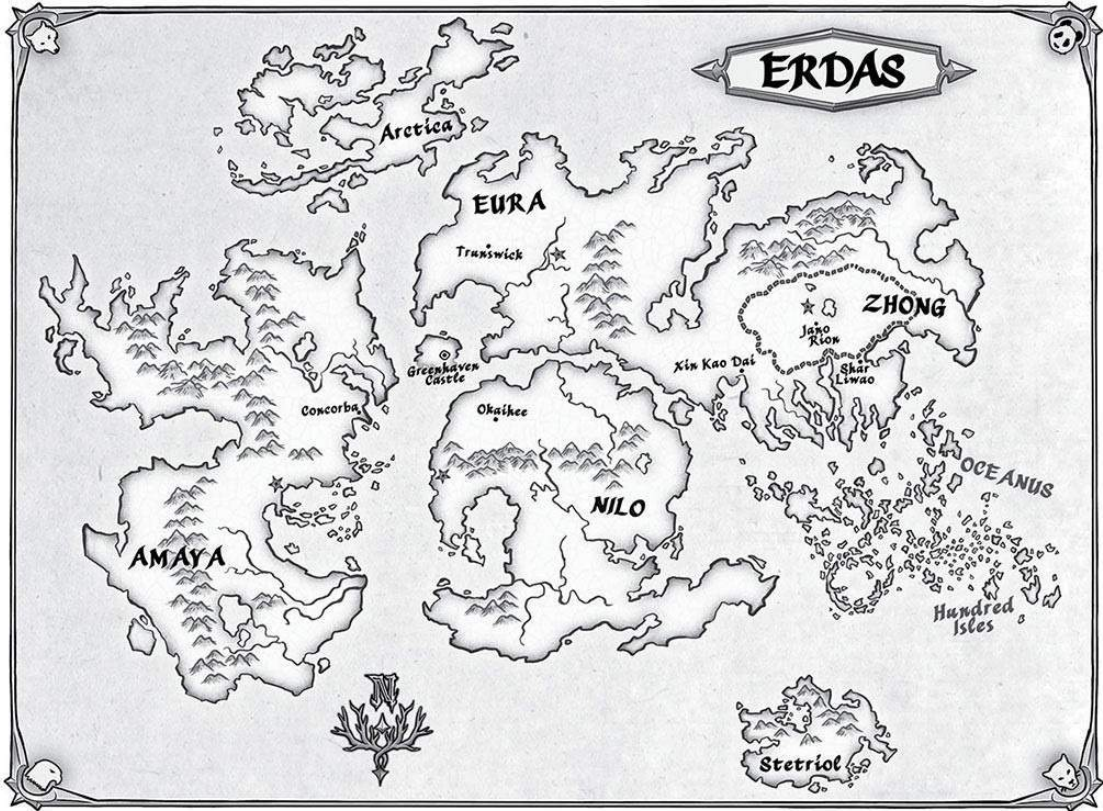
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FIRE AND ICE

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*For my brother Jeff, who once told me his spirit animal was a
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— S.H.*



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THEFT

THE WIND WAS BLOWING FROM THE SOUTH, PUSHING AGAINST Meilin's back, urging her on. Not that she needed any urging. Lately fire seemed to rage inside her, flaring and snapping, insisting she move forward. The others sometimes complained about the endless travel and relentless pace through Zhong and now Northern Eura, but in Meilin's opinion, they couldn't move quickly enough.

Sunlight flared against the roadside river, and Meilin squeezed her eyes shut. As always, the same images were waiting for her behind her eyelids:

The Great Crocodile, jaws open, eyes deepest black.

Her father still. Gone.

Meilin quickly opened her eyes and heeled her horse into a faster trot.

The wind shifted. A breeze from the northwest rolled over her face. She rubbed the goose bumps prickling on her arms.

"It's going to get a lot colder," Rollan said, trotting his horse up beside her. "Unfriendly cold. Bite-your-nose-off-and-bully-your-toes cold."

"Yes," she said.

“I once saw a fellow lousy, good-for-nothing street kid dare a rich kid to lick an iron lamppost in the dead of winter. The rich kid’s tongue stuck there — just frozen stuck — while the street kid robbed him of his coat and shoes.”

“You don’t say,” said Meilin.

“Ah, but I do say, my lady panda!”

“And I don’t suppose the street kid in your story had a name that begins with *R* and ends with *n*?”

“Certainly not! *I* was never lousy. And I only tell you this story as a warning because, you know, you do have that unfortunate habit of licking lampposts.”

Meilin almost smiled. Ever since the battle at Dinesh’s temple, Rollan had spent a lot of time near her, saying ridiculous things more often than not. Trying to distract her from her grief, she assumed. Their journey for the Great Elephant’s talisman had been the most costly one yet. Striking out alone, Meilin had finally found her father leading an embattled resistance from within Zhong’s Great Bamboo Maze. Then, almost as soon as she’d found him, he was gone — killed before her very eyes. At first Meilin had felt . . . quiet. Numb. It was an awful emptiness, like she had nothing left to give. But then, slowly, a heat began to kindle. A fire burned inside her, reminding her that somewhere the Devourer was free — and killing. Meilin wouldn’t let sympathy or silly jokes put this fire out. She kicked her horse even faster.

“Crossroads ahead,” Tarik announced. “Let’s stop for the night.”

“But there’s still a little daylight left,” said Meilin.

“The river veers away from our path at the crossroads,” said Tarik. “We need to water the horses before we continue on north.”

Meilin wanted to complain, but Tarik was looking at her again with understanding and sympathy. Jhi often gave her the same understanding and sympathetic look — which was why she kept Jhi in passive state as often as possible. It was becoming unbearable. The next person who looked at her with understanding and sympathy was going to get —

“Meilin?” said Abeke.

“What?” Meilin snapped.

“Oh!” said Abeke, starting back. “Um, I was just going to ask you if you wanted to help me gather firewood —”

“Yes, I do,” Meilin said forcefully.

The flat ground around the crossroads was filling up, travelers and trader caravans setting up camp for the night. Their team was traveling up a flat, grassy expanse of Northern Eura. It was nowhere near Glengavin, sadly, or Finn, but the road was quiet and safe for once. There was even a minstrel troupe — a lute player strumming, a woman in a blue veil singing softly as if rehearsing.

Abeke didn't talk as they scavenged driftwood and broken branches from the riverbank. Good. Silence allowed Meilin to focus entirely on the burning inside, her whole being tuned to the idea of the Devourer, as if she were an arrowpoint and he the target.

With armloads of wood, they headed to where Tarik, Rollan, and Conor were unsaddling the horses. Laying stones into a circle for the fire pit was the ginger-haired Euran Greencloak Maya, whom Tarik had asked to join them on their quest back to the North. She was older than Meilin by a handful of years, but her small pale face beneath her abundant curly red hair could be mistaken for someone younger.

Maya pushed up the sleeve of her purple sweater, exposing a small lizard-shaped tattoo on her forearm. With a burst of light, her fire salamander emerged from passive state and scurried up her shoulder. The black salamander bore bright yellow spots all over its body and was small enough to curl up in her palm. Meilin smiled sadly at Maya, certain the girl had been disappointed in her spirit animal, as Meilin had been with her panda. A salamander couldn't possibly lend any useful talents in battle.

Meilin and Abeke unloaded their wood, Abeke dumping some into the fire pit. Meilin was about to correct her. To start a fire, they needed smaller pieces of kindling first, and then —

Maya lifted her hand, and a ball of fire formed above her palm. She blew, and

the fire shot into the wood, seizing the whole bundle in instant flames.

“Oh!” said Meilin.

“Hadn’t you seen Maya’s trick before?” asked Conor.

Meilin shook her head.

“I’m not much of a fighter, I’m afraid,” said Maya with a generous smile.

“I’ve got the one trick and that’s about all I’m good for.”

“That one trick might be indispensable for us in the icy North,” said Tarik.

The veiled singer paced by; she and her lute-playing partner were on their way to the water. “You’re heading north?” she asked. “Whatever for? Nothing is north of here but cold, more cold, and then really, really cold.”

“And walruses,” said Rollan. “I’m determined to see a walrus. If they’re actually real.”

“Rollan, I’ve told you,” said Tarik, “I’ve seen them with my own eyes.”

“Finned, legless elephants?” said Rollan. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“We’re headed to Samis,” Abeke said to the minstrels. “Have you been there?”

“Oh, Samis, that’s right,” said the lute player. “I’d almost forgotten there was any town between here and Arctica. No one bothers to go to Samis.”

“We tried once, years ago, didn’t we, my love?” said the veiled woman, holding her partner’s hand and twirling around him. “Traders warned us that Samis turns away all visitors. But surely they’re starved for entertainment, we said. So up we rode . . .”

“And, can you guess?” said the lute player. “Turned away at the town gate.” He played a chord on his lute as if announcing the end of a song.

The pair danced off.

“No traders?” said Abeke. Uraza lay beside her, stretched out, and Abeke petted the leopard thoughtfully, evoking a bone-rattling purr. “In my village, without traders, we’d have no metal goods — no pots and pans, shovels, anything like that. If we purchase some metal items here to give to the people of Samis, maybe we can get in their good graces.”

Tarik nodded. "A fine idea."

He removed a few coins from his purse and gave them to Abeke. She left to shop for the gifts, Uraza padding behind her.

A few minutes later Meilin heard angry shouts from across the camp. She stood, lifting her arm to call out Jhi, but resisted the urge.

"Are Abeke and Uraza still out there?" Meilin asked.

"Stay here," said Tarik, running toward the noise.

But that fire was burning in Meilin, and she couldn't sit still. She raced after Tarik, Rollan following, leaving Conor and Maya to tend the fire and watch their things.

In the center of camp, two men rolled around in the dirt, throwing punches and yanking hair. Tarik's spirit animal, the otter Lumeo, rode on his shoulder. With his abilities enhanced, Tarik dove into the fight as easily as an otter into water and separated the men.

"Enough!" Tarik said, and the catcalls and shouts died out. "What's going on here?"

"He robbed me!" The speaker was a stout, bald man. His nose was bleeding, his shirt torn. "I'd been saving up for years now, a coin here, a coin there. I almost had enough to take home, get my mother out of that dirty city, buy her a farm in the country. Almost had it! Till he cut the purse from my belt."

He lifted the corner of his shirt, showing the cut ends of two leather straps still tied to his belt.

"I'm telling you, it wasn't me!" said the other. "Bill, I've traveled with you for years. Why would I rob you now?"

"I don't know! But you're the only one I told about it, and if you didn't take it, where'd it go?" said Bill. He sat back in the dirt, crying into his hands. "I saved for so long. . . ."

"Sir, your friend is telling the truth," said Rollan. "He didn't rob you."

Meilin glanced at Rollan. Essix was circling the sky nearby. In the past, she had to be touching Rollan to enhance his intuition. Perhaps the bond between the

boy and his gyrfalcon was improving at last, though Meilin had still never seen Essix take the passive form.

The one called Bill looked up, his dirty face streaked with despair. “Then who did?”

Rollan scanned the crowd of traders, musicians, and travelers who had gathered to watch the fight. A curious hush fell over the group.

Rollan’s eyes stopped on one lanky young man wearing a crisp white shirt and cravat, who was inspecting a wagon wheel, his back to the fight. Rollan’s brows narrowed.

“I’d check fancypants over there,” said Rollan, nodding in the man’s direction.

Tarik grabbed the lanky man’s arms, holding them behind his back.

“What are you doing?” Fancypants shouted.

“I mean, that is a *stunning* wagon wheel,” said Rollan, “but maybe not quite fascinating enough to pull your attention from a camp brawl? Unless you’re just trying not to be noticed.”

Meilin and another trader patted him down. Meilin felt a bulge in his boot and reached in, pulling out a leather sack heavy with coins, its strings cut. She tossed the bag to Rollan.

The man struggled, cursing. Meilin stood, her hands in eager fists. That fire inside her flared, threatening to burn her if she did not strike a blow, take down the Devourer and all his followers. Perhaps this petty thief would do for now. But Tarik held him tight, and Meilin exhaled, letting her fists relax.

Rollan held the bag up to the man’s cut strings.

“That looks like a match to me,” said Rollan.

Rollan handed Bill the purse.

“Thank you,” Bill whispered, clutching it to his chest.

“At the last crossroads someone was robbed too,” said an older woman with pulled-back white hair and rough riding clothes. “That was you as well, wasn’t it, Jarack?”

The man called Jarack just thrashed in Tarik's iron grip.

"Traders have a code!" said the woman. "You broke it. Jarack, you are banished from this caravan and from ever trading in the North."

Jarack looked as if he would speak, but a dozen traders moved in behind the woman, some with folded arms, some bearing weapons. Tarik let him go. Jarack cursed, grabbed a pack from his wagon, and ran off into the night.

When Meilin and Rollan walked back to camp, Bill and his friend were shaking hands.

"Nothing like a robbery and caravan scuffle to get you warmed up for supper," said Rollan.

Meilin slowed her steps so she could walk beside him. She opened her mouth, readying a retort, something that might make Rollan laugh or fire back, start a conversation that would keep them talking for hours. But instead of words in her throat, she felt only searing heat — anxious, needy. She picked up the pace, leaving him behind as she neared their camp.

Up ahead, she saw Conor, lying back against his wolf, Briggan, petting his head. Maya was on her stomach, holding her fire salamander, Tini, on her palm and talking earnestly.

All Greencloaks spoke to their spirit animals, but Maya was holding what appeared to be an intense one-sided conversation with an amphibian! Perhaps she was mad, but she seemed so content, at ease. Everything Meilin was not.

Perhaps Jhi could help . . . *no*. Meilin clenched her fists, refusing the thought. Jhi *would* calm her down. But Meilin didn't want peace. She wanted a fight! The rage in her flared hotter, scalding her chest, her throat. She pressed her eyes shut to keep from crying and saw the image again: *Her father, still, his eyes vacant.*

A sob hit her throat like a fist. She opened her eyes and released Jhi.

The panda landed on the ground, turned, and looked at her. As always, Meilin thought the panda looked comical, black limbs over a white body like ill-fitting clothes, the black rings around her eyes drooped down as if sad. Everything

about the beast was round and cuddly. Meilin wanted to be angry yet again that she hadn't bonded with a predator, fierce and battle ready.

But Jhi's silver eyes stared at her, intent. Meilin returned the gaze, took a breath, and suddenly everything seemed to slow.

Meilin became aware of the cool breeze against the hairs of her arms, of the rich, velvety blue of the evening sky. Sounds seemed to break apart, and she could easily separate voices from the rushing of the river — the many conversations at camp pulling apart into their own pieces, the footfalls from Rollan coming up behind her, and just beyond him, faster footfalls. Running.

She turned. Time wasn't really slowed. Wrapped in Jhi's peace, her perception of the moment was so intense the world just seemed slow.

Rollan smiled at her. "What?" he asked.

He couldn't see. Jarack was running at Rollan's back, and he was holding a long, curved knife.

"Rollan!" Meilin shouted.

The calm from Jhi still surrounded her. Before Rollan even had a chance to turn and look, Meilin noticed a rock by her foot, kicked it into her hand, and threw, striking Jarack in the shoulder.

Startled, Rollan took a step back, inches from Jarack's knife. By then Meilin was already in motion, running forward. She slid the rest of the way, knocking her feet into Jarack's legs, sending him off balance. She could see from the way he moved that he had no martial training — but he had plenty of rage and a very large knife. He wasn't going to give up.

He swiped. Meilin seemed to see the arc of the knife's trajectory as if it were drawn in the air, slowly nearing her neck. She dodged easily, leaning to deliver a kidney punch. Jarack doubled over and then swiped again. This time she punched his sternum, knocking the wind from him, then made a sharp cut with the edge of her hand against his arm. He dropped the knife. Holding his wrist, he looked at her, eyes afraid. He turned and ran away.

Rollan was staring at her with absolute surprise. The wave of calm emanating

from Jhi dissipated, and time seemed to click forward again at its natural pace.

“You were moving so fast,” he said. “How did you do that?”

“I didn’t feel fast,” she said. “Everything else just seemed slow.”

Rollan frowned.

“I’m sorry, Rollan,” said Meilin. “You probably think I’m bossy and pushy, and you could have handled him yourself, and I shouldn’t interfere all the time and —”

“Meilin!” he said. She realized he’d been saying her name over and over.

“Meilin, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said and started to turn.

“No, I mean it.” Rollan hesitated. “I . . . on the streets, I was always part of a crew, but if one of my crew had to choose between me and a hot meal, well, I knew which way he’d go. But here with you . . . you guys, for the first time . . . I guess what I’m trying to say is, I trust you. And for me, that’s a big deal.”

He smiled that Rollan smile that she was coming to know so well. At first he’d just been some orphan boy to her. And now here she was standing before him, an orphan herself — mother dead birthing her, father killed by the Devourer — homeless, nowhere to return to, just trying to survive. More like him than she’d ever imagined possible. His brown eyes were warm, his brown skin speckled with dirt from the road, his broad face comfortingly familiar. Inside the great void of despair that had filled her since her father’s death, she felt a pinprick of hope.

And then Rollan reached out and took her hand. His fingers were warm.

Meilin had never been so aware of the beating of her heart.



THE ROAD TO SAMIS BEGAN TO LOSE ITS ROADNESS. GRASSES and brambles reclaimed the hard dirt, and Conor was confident they were actually headed somewhere only because Tarik had a map to follow.

Before he saw any sign of the village, Conor spotted a herd of caribou. The gray-coated, big-antlered animals grazed a green countryside, watched over by two —

“Shepherds!” said Conor. “Or caribou herders anyway. I’d like to go talk to them.”

“Sure,” said Rollan. “Have at it. Just, you know, don’t give them the Slate Elephant or Granite Ram. I mean, if you can help it.”

“Rollan,” Tarik said quietly.

Rollan shrugged, unconcerned at the rebuke.

Conor felt sick. He’d been foolish to hope that the others had forgotten how he’d given the Iron Boar Talisman over to the enemy in exchange for the safety of his family. Not forgotten or forgiven.

Conor pretended not to hear and just walked on.

Two young men were sitting on the grass, chatting in the shade of a lone tree in a patch of pink and lavender lupines.

Conor carried a shepherd's crook with him on this journey back in Eura. He knew it would likely serve little purpose beyond a walking stick, as there had been precious few sheep to herd on their quests. But the thick wood staff felt right in his fist, its heft as familiar as the smell of woodsmoke in the hearth at home, the pinesap crackling, his mother's bread baking. After the frightening battle in Zhong and the whole Iron Boar business, a crook in his fist was comforting, even if it meant never using the crook for its intended purpose.

Now, though, he raised the staff high as he approached, hoping to greet the herders as colleagues. He expected a wave in return, maybe a hello. Perhaps an invitation to join their shade. Instead, they jumped to their feet, looking cautious. Both were blond and fair and looked to be twenty years old or nearly so. Their dark blue jackets and brown trousers seemed clean and unworn, perfectly fitting their broad, athletic builds. No herders Conor knew wore clothes so fine.

"Hello!" said Conor. "My name is Conor, and I'm a shepherd myself. Or I was until I joined up with my Greencloak companions there. My family kept sheep in central Eura. You're watching caribou? I've never seen a herd of domestic caribou before."

"We don't see visitors to Samis," said one.

"Never," said the other.

"We won't be staying long," said Conor. "Do you ever keep sheep, or just caribou?"

The herders glanced at each other but didn't answer.

Conor was aware of his teammates behind him, waiting for him to form some kind of herder bond with these strangers. He sighed at himself and kept at it. Though the herders rarely spoke a word, Conor went on about sheep, the different breeds, asking in-depth questions about caribou eating and sleeping habits.

While he was talking, Conor's practiced eye caught motion in the forest of firs that bordered the meadow. Shadow sliding over shadow, a glint of eyes.

"Is that . . ." Conor began, pointing.

The herders turned, squinting.

“Oh, no, they’re back,” said one.

The boys whistled, frantically calling to their herd. The caribou started and began to run away from the woods. The shadows emerged from the fir forest. Five brown wolves. The shaggy, lean beasts ran at the nearest caribou, splitting as if to meet it from all sides.

“Briggan!” said Conor, pulling up his sleeve. Pain briefly seared the back of his forearm, and the great gray wolf left passive state and leaped to the ground. “A pack over there. They’ll hunt these people’s caribou.”

Briggan howled.

The wolf pack cut short. One howled back. Briggan responded. The wolves seemed to consider, then with a yip, the pack leader renewed the hunt, the rest following.

Briggan growled and ran. His speed both alarmed and thrilled Conor, as his wolf cut off the wolf pack before they reached the fleeing caribou. He launched himself at the pack leader, seizing him by the neck, the two rolling through the grass. They separated, both hunched low and growling, all teeth showing.

The rest of the pack was surrounding Briggan now — five to one. Conor began to run closer, his speed enhanced with Briggan in active state. His legs felt strong and long, the grass whipping by as he sped forward, clenching his crook. His heart pounded.

But before he reached them, the pack leader stopped growling. He circled as if chasing his tail, head down, nose nearly touching the ground. The submissive posture surprised Conor, coming from the leader of a pack facing just a lone wolf. Then again, that lone wolf was Briggan, one of the Four Fallen.

The pack leader howled and retreated to the forest, the pack following.

Briggan trotted over to Conor and accepted a hearty neck scratch and much petting.

“Good boy, Briggan,” said Conor. “Thank you.”

The herders approached, eyes wide.

“A wolf with blue eyes,” said one. “He’s Briggan, isn’t he? *The Briggan*.”

Conor nodded. And at last he wasn’t the one doing all the talking. The herders had to recount to each other all the Briggan legends they knew. One took Conor by the arm and said, “Come on, Old Henner will want to hear about this.”

Leaving the other with the herd, the young man ran with Conor toward the small gate in the village fence.

“Henner, you’ll never guess!” the herder shouted at a man standing just inside the gate. “Briggan saved our caribou. *The Briggan!*”

And then he was retelling the whole incident, embellishing the more exciting bits.

Henner smiled through the gate’s little window. “Briggan! You don’t say? But what are you young folks doing up here?”

“We need to meet with your lord, or —” Conor looked over the village, considering it too small to have a lord like the duke in Trunswick. “Do you have a mayor? It’s really important.”

Tarik and the others came up behind him then. Henner looked them all over.

“Pia doesn’t meet with visitors,” he said.

“We have some gifts for Pia and your village,” said Abeke, pulling two metal pots and three metal knives from her pack.

Henner’s eyes widened again.

Conor noticed the buttons on the herder’s jacket were cut from antler, as were the knife in his belt and the buckle itself. Even the hinges on the gate were made of leather. Cut off from traders, this town had a metal shortage.

“We also carry news,” said Meilin. “We wish to warn your mayor and trade information. I think we can be of some help to you, and we will of course be at your service and depart the moment you ask.”

Henner considered Meilin, the metal gifts in Abeke’s hands, and Briggan beside Conor.

“Well . . .” Henner began.

“Oh, just let them in for a bit,” said the herder. “We never have visitors, and

you should have seen what Briggan did! *The Briggan!*”

Henner smiled and opened the gate. “I guess it couldn’t hurt this once. Follow me.”

“Well done,” Tarik whispered just loud enough for Conor to hear.

“We don’t trade much,” Henner said, leading them up a narrow path. “Our villagers like to keep to themselves. A quiet people.”

Loud laughter startled Conor.

“Not *that* quiet,” Rollan muttered.

They were passing a small park area, abundant with lupines, tulips, and buttercups. On a bench built from wood slats and antlers, three young women sat, talking and laughing. They were as blond, tall, and athletic-looking as the herders had been. For that matter, so was Henner. For all his talk of “young folks,” *Old* Henner couldn’t have been more than a few years older than the herders. Conor wondered if they were all siblings.

A huge, ancient weeping willow bowed over a tiny cemetery.

“Look,” Meilin whispered. “The stones have names — but not dates.”

Conor nodded, though he didn’t understand what Meilin meant. He’d never seen a cemetery before and didn’t know why the absence of dates might be strange.

The dozens of houses looked nearly identical — long and narrow; gray stones cemented together for the foundation, the rest built from wood and painted red. The roofs were shingled with rough-cut bark, and the chimneys were built from fat and irregular stones. From house to house the only obvious variations were in the shutters and the doors on their leather hinges, each carved and intricately painted with unique designs of flowers, trees, woodlands, and often, a great white polar bear.

No road cut through the village, no sign of horses or wagon ruts. Paths were evenly spaced and marked with fine gravel, winding between houses and small parks. The village square was large and open, with a bright green lawn surrounded by stone paths and tulip beds.

Conor slowed, walking with the other three and letting Tarik and Maya keep pace with Henner.

“Those carvings are pretty,” said Conor, indicating the shutters. “I can’t imagine shepherds and farmers having time to sit and carve. Back home we kept busy just to stay fed.”

“These folks seem to have all the time in the world,” said Abeke, watching a couple strolling down a lane, holding hands.

“Could this be the lost city of chiseling artists?” asked Conor.

“Lost what?” said Rollan. “Chiseling who?”

“You know, from that song,” said Conor, and he began to sing. “‘Hidden from the ruinous wind, they chiseled a city from snow. . . .’”

“It’s just a song,” said Meilin. “You think all songs are real? In that case, I am excited to finally meet ‘the jolly giraffalump what slurps pigs through its nose.’”

“Or remember this one? ‘The giant tooted one horn with his mouth,’” sang Rollan, “‘a second with his other end. And with both blasts, he amassed a crowd of admiring friends.’”

“I am unfamiliar with that particular song, Rollan,” said Abeke. “Could you perhaps explain the ‘other end’ bit? I find it confusing.”

“Well, it’s . . .” Rollan paused, eyes scanning Abeke’s face as if to determine how serious she was. She gave him a faint smile.

“Anyway, it does look like a village for dolls,” Meilin interjected. “The emperor’s daughter had such toys. Tiny, perfect painted houses she set up for her tiny, perfect dolls.”

“Exactly.” Rollan looked around and began to whisper, “Even the people look . . . well, they look like dolls.”

Apparently all the children and elderly were indoors, because everyone Conor had seen ranged in age from teenager to early adulthood. The men and women were all tall, with broad shoulders, strong arms, and lovely, perfect faces. Their hair color ranged from pale brown to gold, and everyone was smiling.

Conor shivered, remembering Trunswick — the darkness, the guards with

mastiffs, the fear in the streets. Here everything was just the opposite — bright and perfect. And yet Samis too felt just a little bit off.

Briggan sniffed the air and sneezed.



PIA

ABEKE TRIED TO IMAGINE WHAT LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE growing up in a place like Samis. So green! Leisure to plant gardens, stroll through parks, carve shutters. Even as a small child, Abeke had felt the crushing weight of need — need for rain, for meat, for crops to grow. Need to survive. No time for games or parks.

And beneath it all, the need to make her father and sister proud. That part still hadn't diminished. She gripped her bow and walked faster.

“Can we meet with your local Greencloak?” Tarik was asking Henner.

“Uh, well, we don't have one,” said Henner. “Never really needed one.”

Never needed one? Even in Abeke's small village, they'd had a Greencloak — someone with the Nectar, someone to conduct the bonding ceremony with the children when they turned eleven. It didn't matter if a child was in Eura or Nilo or anywhere — if that child was destined to bond with a spirit animal, it would happen with or without the Nectar. But without, the child could get the bonding sickness and risk madness or even death.

Abeke thought it unforgivably stupid of these villagers to risk their children by refusing to allow a Greencloak in the village.

Then again, where *were* all the children?

Henner stopped at a house where a woman was weeding a garden around peas and lettuce.

“Pia, we have some visitors,” said Henner.

Pia stood up slowly. She appeared to be older than everyone else Abeke had seen in Samis, though her fair skin was unwrinkled, her dark blond hair free of gray. She wore a dark blue dress with a full skirt that stopped just below the knee. It was trimmed with bands of red and topped with a fringed yellow collar. The other villagers wore similar outfits cut from the same blue and red clothes, the same felt boots with curled-up toes, but only Pia wore the yellow collar. Abeke guessed it was some sign of her rank — like the epaulets on the shoulders of military leaders, or even her own green cloak.

“I see you’ve come a long way,” said Pia. “But I’m sorry, Samis doesn’t entertain visitors.”

“That boy there has bonded with Briggan,” said Henner. “He drove off the wolf pack that’s been harassing the herd. And the Nilo girl brought us metal.”

Abeke handed Pia the pots and knives. Pia looked over them as if at all the gold of Zhong, hefting them in her hands.

“This is . . . this is very kind. Thank you.” Pia smiled. And with that simple gesture, Abeke didn’t feel worried anymore. The strangeness of the town, the long journey, and the strained welcome all faded for her in the power of one genuine smile. Something in Abeke warned that she shouldn’t be quite so trusting, but she just didn’t believe bright smiles could hide dark hearts.

“If we could just speak with you a moment,” said Tarik.

Pia pressed her lips together, but the smile returned and she gestured them inside.

The little parlor of her house was neat and clean — wood benches were topped with leather cushions, a carved table showed tiny animals whittled from bone. Several sets of caribou antlers hung on the walls, their tips filed down and fit with candles. Under their feet was a rug of woven fir roots.

They sat, and Meilin spoke first, as if she'd been holding in words she couldn't bear to keep quiet any longer.

"Zhong has fallen," she said.

Pia inhaled sharply.

"A new Devourer has risen, calling vast armies to his terrible cause," said Tarik. "If Zhong has fallen to the Conquerors, Eura won't be far behind. If Eura falls, Samis will fall with it."

"You came all this way to warn us? There are no soldiers here to help in your war," said Pia. "We are too small to —"

"We're looking for Suka," said Tarik.

There was a brief pause, and Pia turned so still and thoughtful that she seemed to have fallen asleep with her eyes open.

"She's a giant polar bear," Rollan prodded. "You know, from the stories? The stories that mention this village? That you are living in right now? No? Nothing?"

Pia's eyes darted to Rollan and back to Tarik, and then she laughed. "Suka! Well, she's not here at the moment, but I expect her to stop by for supper any minute." Pia laughed again.

An expression of measured disappointment clouded Tarik's face. Abeke hoped it wasn't a sign of bad things to come.

"Greencloak scholars uncovered several legends that say Suka showed favor to your town," said Tarik. "Supposedly the last place she was seen was here in Samis."

"Yes, I've heard the legends," said Pia. "But legends are old, and if Great Suka used to favor our town, she hasn't been to Samis in many, many lifetimes."

"She used to drink from a pond here," said Tarik. "May we see it?"

Pia hesitated, but then that wide smile returned. "Of course. It is sacred to us, so I'll ask you not to touch the waters. Follow me."

At the very north end of the village grew two ancient willows, their branches sheltering a pond. Perhaps the pond was natural, but people had placed stones

around it, even lining the pond's bottom with smooth, flat rocks. The water was so clear, Abeke could see the stones easily through five or ten feet of water. The surface rippled as if stirred by a breeze, though Abeke felt nothing.

"This is Suka's pond," said Pia. "She . . . Legend says she used to come here once a year and drink."

"How could Suka get here when the village is walled in?" asked Rollan.

"You think that a little wall would slow down a Great Beast?" asked Pia. "Besides, this was long ago, before the wall surrounding Samis was built."

She gestured to a carving of an upright polar bear, cut from a jagged white rock.

"We honor her with this memorial, but of course we have no idea where Suka has been hiding all these years."

"It seems weird to me that you would flat-out lie to us like that," said Rollan.

Pia started, then smoothed her features.

"*Rollan*," Abeke whispered. Maybe he'd never learned to respect his elders. If Abeke had dared talk like that to her father, she'd get switch whipped.

"That's an impertinent thing to say, young man," Pia said.

Rollan shrugged. "Sorry. Still true. You're hiding something."

Essix wasn't perched on Rollan's shoulder. Could Pia's lies be clear enough that Rollan could detect them even without his gyrfalcon in direct contact? Or perhaps his spirit-animal-enhanced intuition was getting stronger.

"You say Suka came before the wall was built," said Meilin. "Yet the layers of reindeer moss growing on the wood shows the wall's age, going back to even before the time of the Devourer, perhaps."

"I had a dream last night," said Conor. "I thought it was just a dream, not a *dream* dream, you know what I mean?"

Abeke nodded. Since bonding with Briggan, Conor sometimes had prophetic dreams.

"But I recognize this pond from my dream," Conor continued. "A group of elderly people was staggering along toward it, and their faces were eager."

Pia's pale face turned even paler.

Abeke had kept Uraza in passive state up till now so as not to seem hostile, but she needed her leopard's aid now. She reached a hand slowly toward the pond, palm up, almost as if the waters were a wayward puppy she was about to call toward her. In a quick motion she brought her fingers into a fist, and Uraza flashed into existence. Pia stumbled back a step, stunned at the appearance of yet another Great Beast, even though like Briggan, Uraza was the size of a normal leopard. Uraza padded toward the pond as if to drink.

"No one drinks from this water! Neither human nor beast, be it Great or common!" said Pia. "It is sacred!"

The leopard sniffed at the water and recoiled, looking back at Abeke, communicating that something was wrong.

"Don't worry, she doesn't want to." Abeke sat at the water's edge with a hand on Uraza, in part to reassure Pia, but also to feel some of the clarity of thought that came with their bond. There were pieces of something here, a fractured story that could fit together like the gazelle-antler puzzles that Chinwe, her village's Greencloak, used to carve. Abeke had always been good at those.

Rain Dancer. Chinwe had declared Abeke the new Rain Dancer for the village, but her bond with a Great Beast had forced her to leave. Now she allowed herself to soak in that title, to feel community with the water before her, sense it as she would the presence of a friend standing near, her hand stroking Uraza's neck. She was dimly aware of the conversation continuing without her, Tarik and Pia and Rollan speaking in turn. But Abeke pointed her thoughts instead to the water. To Pia. To the people of Samis. No children, no elders. Conor's dream. The gate and wall. *Old Henner.*

All the pieces of this puzzle were snapping together in Abeke's mind. She knew this story. In Nilo the legend was of a tree whose fruit would keep you young forever, and two villages that destroyed each other and the tree itself while trying to possess it.

A tense pause in the conversation seemed to vibrate the air around her, and

she stood.

“You know,” Abeke said, “it’s interesting that there are no children or elderly in your village, Pia. And there’s something different about this water that Suka used to drink. Uraza can smell it. And Conor’s dream about elderly people hurrying toward the pond? I’m thinking that you’re much older than you look, Pia. I’m thinking Old Henner might actually *be* old. You all are. And that has something to do with Suka’s pond.”

Rollan looked at the water, taking a step back. “That’s unnatural.”

“You can’t think —” Pia began.

“Perhaps we should all drink from the pond,” said Tarik. “Just to check Abeke’s idea.”

“Ooh, what do you think, Tini?” Maya asked her salamander, holding him in her palm. “Do you want to live forever and ever and ever and —”

“No, wait.” Pia sighed, sitting on a rock beside the pond. She looked at each one of them in turn, directly in the eyes, as if checking for something. She sighed again. “Very well. Suka did come to this pond and drink, every year on New Year’s Day. The villagers have always avoided the place, believing the event was sacred. When I was young, my mother told me that as long as we kept the waters clear for Suka, we would be under her protection. But I was always curious. I wanted to see the Great Polar Bear for myself. So when I became mayor, I built my house near her pond, and I watched her, year after year.”

Pia’s eyes became unfocused, as if watching a memory. “She was huge and terrifying, but you’ve never seen anything so beautiful. It was as if the moon itself had dipped down to drink from our waters. Suka didn’t seem to mind my company. I kept quiet, just watched her until she’d sated herself and ambled away. Nearly three decades passed that way — she and I and our little ritual.

“Then, one year, she simply didn’t come. I went to the pond. I watched and waited, but Suka never arrived. It felt wrong, a breaking of a tradition. So early that morning, just before the sunrise, I crouched down and drank from the pond myself, to complete the new year.”

Pia paused.

“The waters changed you,” said Tarik.

Pia nodded. “A stillness came over me. I seemed to feel the bones of my skeleton as if they burned, and the gentle heat worked through my muscles, my skin. I was a grandmother at that time, but I seemed to get younger. Ever since, these waters have kept us young. Some chose not to take the water and lived a normal life span. Others grew tired of their long lives and stopped drinking. They aged within a few years and then died peacefully. Those who drink never have children, and all who remain in Samis today have drunk. We are the last of our clan.”

“You think Suka drank from here for the same purpose?” asked Meilin.

Pia shook her head. “The water here used to be pale brown like the river nearby, but the longer Suka stayed away, the more clear, crystal, nearly blue it became. I heard rumors years ago come down from Arctica that Suka had frozen herself and her talisman deep within the ice. I believe that with her powers in suspension, her tie to this pond is granting it life-giving magic. If you find Suka and wake her, the powers of the water might go away. Then all of Samis would dwindle and die.”

“It’s a terrible risk,” said Tarik, “but the future will be even more terrible if the Devourer wins. We need to find her.”

“It doesn’t matter. I know nothing that would help you.” She glanced uneasily at Rollan and then away. “You may stay the night and then you must go. We have no inn, so you’ll need to sleep in the stable. Visitors might discover the secret of the pond, as you have. If the secret gets out, people would come from all over. Wars would be raged over its waters.”

“Of course,” said Tarik. “We swear to keep your secret.”

Abeke mumbled affirmation. Conor and Meilin both intoned “I so swear” at exactly the same time, startling each other a little.

“I can keep a secret,” Maya said.

“What secret?” Rollan said.

Pia raised an eyebrow, and then nodded. She didn't seem consoled.



Pia gave them dinner at her house — thinly sliced caribou meat on flatbread with onions and turnips. The meal was close enough to one Abeke had often shared with her family that she desperately wished for the burning tang of a bhut jolokia pepper or one of the dried grass spices of Nilo. She lowered her emotions like a blade, trying to cut off all longing. Just yearning for the food of home had cracked open her heart, reminding her of her father's hands as he sanded sticks for arrows, of her sister's voice singing as she cooked. She missed them more than peppers and spices, but a twinge in her heart reminded her that they probably didn't miss her.

She closed her eyes, sealing the cracks inside, refocusing on Abeke in Northern Eura, Abeke the Greencloak, Abeke who might never return home again.

Uraza pressed her large head under Abeke's hand, rubbing against her palm. Abeke lowered her plate, letting the leopard finish up the caribou meat.

As they settled into the fresh grass strewn on the stable floor, Tarik spoke of traveling north tomorrow and trying their luck exploring Arctica on their own.

"Conor, perhaps you could have a perfectly timed prophetic dream tonight telling us where to go?" said Abeke.

"I'll do my best," said Conor. He smiled.

"So we're just rolling with the whole 'Suka froze herself' thing?" Rollan said. "I admit that Pia didn't seem like she was lying about that, but you guys are all like, 'Yeah, sure, that sounds about right.'"

"It does sound about right," Conor said, tossing a stick down the long, narrow barn for Briggan to fetch.

"But it's *weird*. Does no one else think that is weird?" Rollan looked around the group. "That a bear would freeze herself? How would you even do that?"

“I know a dozen ways at least,” Meilin said. “Wise men and women in Zhong freeze themselves regularly.”

“Wh-what?” Rollan sputtered.

“It is much more comfortable to pass the sweltering summers encased in ice,” Meilin said.

“Fah!” Rollan snorted, throwing up his arms.

Meilin smiled slightly, though Abeke noticed that the smile quickly disappeared.

“And here I thought you were able to tell when people were lying,” Conor muttered, smirking.

“Whatever. In any case, Pia knows more about all this,” said Rollan. “I still think she could help us.”

“But we can’t force her to,” said Tarik.

“I could burn down her house or something,” said Maya through a yawn.

Abeke sat up, staring.

Maya laughed. “Kidding! Kidding!” She settled into the grass cuttings and muttered, “I mean, I *could* burn down her house. But I won’t. Tini and I don’t like hurting anybody, do we, Tini? No, we don’t, you adorable little sticky-footed genius.”



Abeke woke in the morning to Uraza sneezing on bits of hay. She lay stretched out beside Abeke, her body longer than Abeke was tall. Abeke idly stroked her belly and heard Uraza purr. The earth tremor of her purr would be enough to wake up the others.

Sudden noises came in through the window. Shouts. Anger. Sounds that didn’t belong in the perfect doll village of Samis.

By the time Abeke was on her feet, the others were awake and rising. They hurried out to the village center.

First she noticed a hole in the wall. Something had punched through the logs, leaving a gaping hole large enough for a person to climb through.

And it appeared some persons had in fact climbed through.

“Shane!” said Abeke.

A group of five Conquerors stood before the hole, but Abeke’s eyes didn’t stray from Shane — blond, broad, his arms and face tanned from the Zhong sun. The sight of his smile awoke a thousand memories — their hours together training, laughing, whispering stories, standing at the ship’s bow with the spray on their lips, the wind against their faces, feeling as if the whole world could be theirs. Until Shane, Abeke had never known how it felt to be with someone who liked her, who respected her, who even wanted her around.

Abeke could feel her companions around her bristling, hear them pull out weapons, but she walked over to Shane to shake his hand. He surprised her by meeting her halfway, his arms open. He gave her a warm hug.

“I missed you, Abeke,” he whispered into her hair. “I’m so glad you’re here.” Abeke shut her eyes, feeling the sting of tears.

“Back off!” Conor yelled. He pulled Abeke away and faced Shane, holding his crook, Briggan tense by his side. “Touch Abeke again and I’ll knock you flat on your stink-stained Conqueror behind!”

Meilin was beside Conor, and she didn’t waste time with words. She came forward, hands in fists. A tall Zhongese man stepped smoothly in front of Shane, and when Meilin struck, the man defended. She delivered a series of blows that the man blocked with his arms, finally striking her with the palm of his hand. She stumbled back.

Meilin released Jhi. The panda sat calmly behind her, investigating the grass, looking entirely unthreatening, but Meilin smiled, lifted her fists, and said to the man, “Let’s try that again.”

“No, Meilin, Conor, stop,” said Abeke. She and Uraza put themselves in front of Shane.

“We didn’t come to fight,” said Shane. “Please. We just want to talk.”

“Breaking our wall is not talking behavior,” Old Henner called out.

“I apologize for that,” said Shane. “My companions were overeager when you didn’t open the gate for us. I’ll fix it with my own hands, I swear.”

“I’ll fix *you* with my own hands,” Meilin said through clenched teeth.

Abeke and Uraza didn’t move.

“So much has happened, so many deaths on both our sides,” said Shane, his voice warm, melting like butter over hot bread. “Before anyone else dies, let’s talk, please.”

Abeke looked over Shane’s companions now. Besides the Zhongese man, the two impostors they’d last seen in Trunswick flanked him. The pale-haired Tahlia held her toad in both hands like an ugly ball she was ready to throw in some horrible game to which only she knew the rules. Ana was one step behind her, crouched next to her gila monster. She stroked it as one might pet a cat, but her dark eyes were locked on the Greencloaks, peering hatefully between two curtains of straight night-black hair.

To Shane’s other side were two larger warrior-type men, one atop an ox, the other with a brown-eyed lynx weaving between his ankles. They looked vaguely familiar, as if Abeke had seen their faces among the ranks of the Conquerors before. But the Amayan woman beside them was a stranger. She had pale brown skin, dark eyes, and long, straight black hair. Her long travel dress was dark purple, embroidered with yellow and white along the sleeves and hem. On her shoulder sat a grave-looking raven. But what most caught Abeke’s eye was a striking sadness in the woman’s beautiful face.

“So, talk,” said Tarik. “We’re listening.”

“Tarik,” Meilin growled. Her knees were slightly bent, her hands in tight fists. “We know what they want and what they’ll do to get it. Let’s take them now.”

“Meilin,” said Tarik. “Come here, please.”

Meilin hesitated but complied. Abeke joined her group, and the six of them huddled to talk quietly, Uraza and Briggan standing like sentries between them and the Conquerors, teeth bared.

Meilin and Conor glared at Abeke. She expected the same look of anger or mistrust from Rollan too, but he was strangely distracted, just staring over his shoulder at the Conquerors.

“We can’t leave now,” said Tarik. “While we wander north in search of Suka, Shane and his crew might persuade or bully the information out of Pia and beat us to the talisman.”

“So we fight,” said Meilin.

“I’m not confident we could beat that crew,” said Tarik.

“I could beat Shane,” said Conor. “I have no doubt. I dreamed about it.”

“A prophetic dream?” Tarik asked.

Conor fidgeted. “Figure of speech,” he said. “Not like a nighttime dream. Like a detailed mental exercise.”

“You mean, you daydreamed it,” said Meilin. “You imagined punching his face in over and over again.”

“Pretty much,” said Conor.

“Yeah, I’ve had that daydream too,” Rollan muttered.

“Shane means no harm, I swear,” said Abeke. “Look, he doesn’t have his wolverine out. He almost always keeps his spirit animal in passive state when he meets us. A true sign that he doesn’t want to fight.”

“No harm?” said Meilin, eyes burning with rage. “This is the agent of the very being responsible for the destruction of my home and the death of my father. I count those things as great, unforgivable harm.”

Abeke closed her eyes and then opened them slowly. “And that is terrible, unjust, and not easily forgiven. But also not Shane. He’s different. He truly believes he’s on the side of right, just as I did.”

“He. Is. The. Enemy,” said Meilin, as if talking to a small child.

“I know he works for the enemy,” said Abeke. “But I believe that one day he might be able to see the Devourer for what he is.”

“So your secret hope is that Shane will abandon everything he stands for and . . . and change his entire worldview?” asked Meilin.

“It is possible. After all, I did.”

“Yes, and seeing you embrace the Devourer’s errand boy has shown me just how deep your conversion runs.”

Abeke winced.

“Enough,” said Tarik, the beginnings of a frown creasing an already stern expression. “We will not let them tear this team apart. First we will listen, and then —”

There was a sudden blunt cracking sound, as of a fresh kill being struck by a hammer. Abeke looked up quickly to see Shane on one knee, nose bleeding. Meilin stood in a fighting pose several paces away, seemingly too far away to have accomplished such a feat, but Abeke had seen how fast Meilin could move.

“Meilin, no!” Abeke shouted. For a moment Abeke was again at the battle of Dinesh’s temple, knee-deep in water, the air so humid it seemed to push into every pore and try to crawl down her throat. Conquerors swarming at them like ants over fallen bread. An enemy soldier chopping at her, his sword stopped short by Shane’s curved saber. Saved by this boy who was supposed to be her enemy.

And now he stood there, his nose bleeding from Meilin’s fist.

The rest of Shane’s group was variously standing, shouting, or drawing steel.

“Come on!” shouted Meilin. “You are due much more than a mere taste of your own blood, so I will do my best to serve up a feast.”

The ox charged Meilin, and she leaped, pushing off of its advancing skull even as the head reared up. She vaulted faster than seemed possible to Abeke’s eyes, doing a full turn in midair and landing, heel first, in the face of the man who had until recently been riding the ox.

“ENOUGH!” shouted several voices, but none was the owner of the maddened ox, so it spun, frothing at the mouth, and renewed the charge.

Meilin readied herself to dodge the oncoming beast, but Abeke saw Jhi amble into the charging animal’s path.

“Jhi!” Meilin yelled, her stance breaking.

Jhi turned her passive silver-eyed stare to Meilin. And then, the instant before impact, Jhi simply looked at the charging animal. Abeke's jaw dropped as the ox, instead of barreling into the panda, skidded to a halt, knelt, and began to lick Jhi's paw.

"Enough," Pia called out again. Abeke realized the other voices calling "enough" had been Tarik and Shane. Pia had arrived in the town square, that same smile plastered to her face, despite what had just happened. Abeke began to question the sincerity of the smile.

"There is no fighting in Samis," Pia announced.

"Pia," said Tarik, placing a calming hand on Meilin's shoulder. "You have more visitors, as I expected. If you speak to Shane here, I want to be present as well."

She nodded and walked away. Tarik and Shane followed. Abeke hoped Shane would look back, so she could mouth that she was sorry or smile encouragingly or something. But his head was bowed, his hand holding a rag to his bleeding nose.

"Abeke, Conor, keep an eye on —" Tarik nodded toward Tahlia and Ana, the two brutes, and the mysterious woman. "And on Meilin," he added.

Abeke nodded. She had every confidence her big cat could take down any of the other spirit animals. And after this business with Meilin, her own heart was thrumming, her muscles tense, all of her wishing for a fight. But fight whom? Shane's friends? Meilin? Maybe her own self.

She put a hand on Uraza's head and took a deep breath. She would try to keep the peace. For Shane's sake.



AIDANA

ESSIX WAS GONE. EVERYONE STOOD IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE, bristling with weapons and spirit animals, and Rollan felt so bare he might as well be naked. That was why his hands were shaking, that was why his mouth was dry, and why he'd refused to look at the woman with the raven. He wouldn't admit to himself any other reason.

When no one was looking his way, he slipped behind a house and began to circle the inner ring of the town's fence.

"Essix," he hissed. "Please, Essix. Come on."

He couldn't really blame her. Sticking around where people expected you to be led only to trouble. He'd learned the hard way on the streets of Concorba: Keep moving. You stay in one place, the bullies find you. Beat you up. Steal the scrap of blanket and heel of bread you've been hoarding. Almost kill you.

Rollan got it. He just wished Essix would hang around every once in a while, bolster his reputation a bit as a fierce warrior with a faithful spirit animal in tow. On the streets, if you looked harmless, you ate dirt.

"Essix," he whispered again. His voice shook, still addled by the encounter with Shane — and who he'd brought with him. It wasn't possible. He *knew* it

wasn't possible. But she'd looked so much like . . . He shook his head, angry at himself for getting rattled by a familiar-looking face.

Rollan crept behind one of the ridiculously adorable houses with its perfectly carved and painted shutters. When he heard footsteps coming from the other direction, he expected to see one of those tall, muscular, golden-haired beauties that passed as villagers around here.

But it was her.

The woman's hair was as black as her raven's wings, straight and thick, falling down to her waist. Her eyes were dark and large, her skin the brown of the best kinds of bread, her face broad. His breath got tangled in his chest. Something is beautiful, he'd come to understand, if you want to look at it. And her face had for many years been the most beautiful thing in the world to him. And for years after, her face was the image he couldn't help looking for among the crowds of Concorba. Every day, all the time, for years and years, though his heart hurt at the pointlessness of it.

He'd finally given up years ago. Well and truly, given up looking for her, wondering about her, hoping for her. She was dead, he'd been so sure.

Now here — across an ocean and in a strange little village near the top of the world — to see that face again.

Not her, can't be her . . . he told himself.

But her hands raised, and he noticed they were shaking. She seemed to reach for him before hesitating, dropping again. She looked behind her and back again. Her eyes were wide, as if she couldn't look at him hard enough.

"Rollan," she whispered. "Is it really you?"

He nodded. His head was giddy. His legs felt comically shaky, like sacks of sand.

"Rollan," she said again.

Then she began to cry.

She sat on a stone, and he took the excuse to sit too, unsure if he could keep his feet. He could feel the warmth of her arm so near his own, and the realness of

her shocked him. This was not some little boy's desperate daydream. She was here.

"My name is Aidana. But . . . I think you know who I am?" she asked.

He nodded, feeling dumb.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so, so sorry. You know that, right? You know I wouldn't have left you if I could have . . . if I wasn't . . . if I didn't love you enough to leave?"

She hadn't wiped her tears, just left them to run down her cheeks, letting nothing get in the way of looking at him.

Rollan felt his heart ice. Once, back in Concorba, he'd come across a girl alone, sitting on the street, crying loudly. Everyone else ignored her, but he'd gone closer to see if he could help. That was when the rest of her crew had jumped out, struck him in the head, and stolen the two coins he'd earned after a day of begging. When the girl had run off, her crying had changed to laughter.

Instinctively, Rollan looked around, expecting the attack.

No one jumped out.

"Can I — I know nothing will make up for all you might have suffered, but will you allow me to explain?" Aidana asked.

He nodded again, because he really couldn't think of anything else to do.

She took a deep breath, and then the words poured out, as if she'd been holding them in for a long time.

"I didn't mean to — I didn't want to leave you. You believe me? I had no father, no family besides a mother who lived with a bottle in her hand. I turned eleven and never had a Nectar Ceremony. When I was fourteen, Wikerus came to me." She nodded toward her raven, who was perched above them on the branch of a tree. "We bonded without Nectar. I felt" — she pressed her hands against her head — "like I'd been ripped apart. My head, my gut, it was so painful. I think I spent days in a fever, and when I became aware again, my mother had gone, but Wikerus stayed. He always stays."

The raven turned his head, staring at Rollan with one round eye.

“I survived as best I could, battling the bonding sickness. I wasn’t well. And by the time I became pregnant with you . . . Rollan, I tried.” Her voice cracked. “You were so perfect! Such a perfect baby. And at times when I was holding you I felt almost normal. But other times . . .”

Her eyes went dark.

The only image Rollan carried with him from his early childhood was her face, her beautiful face, as if it’d been carved in a cameo and worn against his heart. But as she spoke, he had flashes — her face in a rage, screaming. A bottle thrown into an alley, the explosion of glass, shards flying, cutting into his cheeks. His mother flailing, punching at bricks, while he huddled on a step, frightened. Wandering down a street, alone and cold, searching and searching, and then finding her asleep on the stones. And then curling up tight beside her — to keep her warm, to keep himself warm, to assure himself she would stay close this time.

“Some days I wasn’t sure who I was — who you were,” she said. “One time you woke me, crying in the night. We were sleeping high up in the attic of an abandoned building, and in delirium I thought you were a rat attacking me. I grabbed you and I almost, I almost . . .” Her breath shuddered. “After that I knew I had to get you away from me before I did something horrible. So I took you to a big house near the center of town. I’d watched that family for some time. They had lots of children, and at night the windows were always bright, as if they had plenty of money for candles. So I figured they could afford to keep you. Maybe even love you.”

Rollan wasn’t sure what house she meant. He had no memory of the place.

Aidana swiped quickly at her tears while she talked. “First I washed your face. And your hands. And your tiny little feet. You . . . you didn’t have shoes, but I wanted you to have clean feet, so your new family would know you were a good boy. And then . . . and then I kissed your cheeks and told you to be good and stay put till the nice family came for you, and I knocked on their door and I . . . I ran.”

Rollan didn't realize he'd been crying till he felt a line of cold pull down his cheek. He touched it, and his fingertips came back wet.

"I waited across the street till I saw someone open the door. I knew they'd take you in and take care of you. You were such a smart little boy, I felt sure they'd see that. So I fled. And . . . I don't remember a lot of the next years. I wasn't always in my right mind. But I survived, somehow. Wikerus could steal fruit from trees and bread cooling on windows. Even when I got really bad, Wikerus never left me. Though he bit me sometimes. Clawed at me. He had the bonding sickness too."

She brushed her fingers unconsciously across her cheek, and Rollan noticed a series of pale scars. He thumbed a slash of old scars on his wrist and wondered if Wikerus had caused those as well.

"I think I was dead — or nearly — when Zerif found me. He gave me the Bile to drink, and slowly the darkness left my mind. The Bile cured both of us of that awful sickness. He saved us, Rollan. He saved me and Wikerus. I owe him everything. So of course, I serve him now — serve both him and the Reptile King. He isn't the 'Devourer' you think he is. They're out in the world, looking for people like me who the Greencloaks didn't bother finding, didn't bother helping, curse them."

She looked Rollan over, as if noticing that he wasn't wearing a green cloak, and she smiled approvingly. Her smile faltered.

"Rollan, I wish you'd say something," she whispered.

Rollan licked his lips, trying to work moisture into his mouth. He said, "Ma?" His voice was a dry whisper.

She grabbed his hands, rubbing them as if to warm him up. The gesture was aching familiar.

He was afraid to ask but did. "Once you were well, did you look for me?"

"Yes," she said, clearly relieved to say it. "Yes, I did. I went back to that house, but it'd been sold and the new owners didn't know where the others had

moved. I hoped your new family was living in the country now — with animals, perhaps, and clean air and lots of fresh food. Did you move to the country?”

What could he tell her? She'd seen someone open that door, but she'd left before seeing them shut it again in the face of a ragged little boy. He wondered how long he must have stayed on the doorstep of the big house, waiting for a family to come for him like she'd said. He wondered how long he'd wandered the streets looking for her before giving up and finding a hole to sleep in alone. Should he describe to her the long years of starvation and fear, abandonment, loneliness, of his doing almost anything just to survive and dreaming of a mother who'd held his head to her chest and let him fall asleep against her heartbeat? Or should he tell a kind lie to put her at peace?

He hadn't yet decided when her raven squawked — a jarring, unnaturally loud sound. Wikerus batted his wings and took to the air as Essix came swooping down.

Essix shrieked at the raven. The two birds met midair, feet forward, and clawed at each other.

“No!” said Aidana. “Leave him alone!”

“Essix!” Rollan cried.

The gyrfalcon flew past Rollan and returned again, shrieking as she tried to seize the raven with her talons. The raven fought back, croaking hideously.

“Essix, don't hurt him!”

Essix spun, taking again to the skies, as if to get as far away from Wikerus as possible.

“Essix?” said Aidana, blinking rapidly. “Of course. *You* were one of the children bonded to the Four Fallen.”

“I'm sorry,” said Rollan. “I don't know why she attacked.”

“It's okay. Wikerus isn't hurt.” Aidana took Rollan's hand in both of her own, pressing it with warmth. “I don't want anything to detract attention from our reunion.”

Rollan smiled and wanted to be okay, but he felt uneasy. Essix had warned

him all those months ago to flee from Zerif. Her instincts had been right then and dozens of times since. And the memory of Zerif, and of the Conquerors killing Meilin's father, was still as fresh as a bleeding wound.

He almost leaned in then, ducking his head under her chin as if he were still a little boy, to let her embrace him. But crammed into those few inches between them he felt the years of solitude on the streets, the Conquerors' trail of death, and even a fight between a raven and a falcon.

"I — I should go check with my . . . uh . . . team," he stammered and turned and left before he could change his mind. As he walked away, he felt a raw pang in his chest, as if a chunk of his heart had torn off.

Rollan walked, but his heart just beat harder. He felt jittery, his blood fast, his body anxious for action. He wanted to find someone he could blame for all this pain and hit him. Instead, he ran. He skirted the houses, running beside the fence, working his body hard.

He came upon Pia's house and slowed. Voices drifted from her open window. He slowed his breathing and then crept closer, stooping below the window.

"Say what you will to Pia, Shane, but don't be a fool and expect me to believe your lies!" Tarik was shouting. Shouting. In anger, no less. He never did that. The battle of Dinesh's temple must still be haunting Tarik too.

"Tarik, please," said Shane, calm even in the face of Tarik's rage. "Don't worry about this. You know only I can keep Pia and her town safe."

Rollan heard footsteps on the gravel walk and started away from the window. It was Pia, carrying a pitcher toward the well. Inside, Tarik and Shane continued to argue.

"Overhear anything interesting?" Pia asked, lowering the bucket into the water. She looked tired, her near-constant smile unable to hide the sadness.

"Pia, listen, I'm not a Greencloak, and I'm not a fan of meddling in others' affairs. I think people should mostly just mind their own business. But I've seen what Shane and his allies do. They have no mercy. They kill anyone who gets in their way."

“And what is their way?” Pia asked calmly, pouring water into the pitcher.

“Destruction,” he said. “Domination. No place is safe. If Shane is already here, the army of Conquerors won’t be far behind. There’s no use hiding from them. Nowhere is safe, and nothing will remain the same. Zhong has fallen. They’re all over Nilo and Eura. Please. Helping us isn’t a choice between keeping your extended life and losing it. It’s a choice between any life at all and total destruction.”

Pia nodded. This didn’t seem to surprise her, and Rollan suddenly wondered if she was old enough to remember the war with the first Devourer.

“You know how to help us find Suka,” he said. “Please. Someone’s going to find her, wake her, claim her talisman. If it’s not us, it will be the Conquerors.”

Pia pressed her lips together. She looked out over the town, as if seeing it for the last time. Something in her face made him think she was about to lie to him.

But the heightened sounds of Tarik and Shane came through the window, and Pia sighed.

“Excuse me, I should return to my *guests*,” she said.

She started back to the house. Essix screeched, circling overhead, and in that moment Rollan noticed Pia’s hand straying to her apron pocket, as if making sure something there lay hidden.

Rollan rushed after her, catching her just inside the small kitchen.

“What are you hiding?” he asked, indicating her apron pocket. “What do you have?”

She was still smiling, yet somehow it looked more like a frown. Her hand went into her pocket, and he could see the indecision on her face. “I was going to give this to one of you. And I think you and your friends have a better chance of finding Suka than the newcomers.”

Truth. She meant what she said.

A squawk startled Rollan — Essix shouting a warning. He turned to see Wikerus flying past the open kitchen door and flapping over to Aidana, who was emerging through a small copse of trees.

“Rollan?” Aidana called out, just as Pia dropped something heavy into Rollan’s inner cloak pocket before hurrying back into the main room.

Rollan was addled by the presence of his mother, and he didn’t think to examine Pia’s face before she was already gone. He opened his pocket and peered in — a compass. Why would Pia give him a compass?

He shuffled back outside. The sharp light of morning sun sliced at his eyes, and he blinked rapidly.

“Rollan, are you all right?” Aidana asked, coming nearer. “You ran off.”
Must be a family trait, he thought.

But now she was here — his mother — alive, real. That face from his dreams wasn’t just the vain imagination of a pathetic, lonely orphan boy. And his heart ached where that chunk had torn free.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

And he believed her. She was sorry. Everything she’d said had been true. She’d been sick, mad, trying to protect him. And now she’d found him again. So why did he hurt so much more now than when he’d believed her long dead?

“Stay with me,” she said. “Please.”

Words of affirmation rose in his throat. He choked them down, glancing at the house where Tarik’s and Shane’s voices lashed out the window.

“Shane is good,” said Aidana. “I swear it. I’ve seen so much good that he does.”

“I’ve seen . . . other things,” said Rollan.

“He is passionate about protecting the world from the duplicitous Greencloaks. They hoard the secret of the Nectar; they subject us all to their secret plans.”

He didn’t want to argue with her, but the words came out, pleading. “We don’t need the Greencloaks *or* the Conquerors.”

She shook her head. “Zerif saved my life, Rollan. I won’t abandon his cause. Abandoning you was hard enough — I won’t do that again, not to anyone I care about. Besides, with the Bile, we’re saving hundreds more from the bonding

sickness. The Reptile King is turning the tide of power all over Erdas! Come join us. Be a part of the new world.”

She held out her hands, as if yearning for him. Essix wasn't there to disapprove. So Rollan stumbled forward and almost fell against her. Her arms wrapped around him, warm and wonderful. He didn't lift his own, just let himself be held. He felt her cheek lay against the top of his head, her heartbeat steady against his chin. Part of him felt safe and whole for the first time in his life. And another part ached beyond belief.



DANGEROUS TRAVEL

ROLLAN WOKE WITH HIS HEART POUNDING. HE'D BEEN dreaming of a raven, wings as wide as the night sky, coming at his eyes, talons first.

Rollan wiped at his face with his sleeve, trying to scrub the image away. His shirt smelled like his mother's embrace.

He covered his face with his hands and took deep breaths to keep from weeping. He felt as if someone had pressed a wedge to his heart and struck with a mallet, splitting him like firewood. All those years on the streets, he'd carefully hardened his heart, building calluses like the ones on his bare feet. He'd worked hard to mold himself into a tough, unbreakable street kid. It nearly brought a laugh to his throat. He was so tough and unbreakable, yet even the thought of his mother almost reduced him to tears.

She'd been sick to madness. There was comfort in knowing that she hadn't abandoned him out of indifference, at least. And where had the Greencloaks been with their precious Nectar and lofty promises when his mother had turned eleven? They'd abandoned her too.

The Bile cures bonding sickness! This realization struck him with a force that nearly knocked him back. Abeke had insisted that Shane meant well, and here

was proof that the Conquerors were doing good. They'd cured his own mother.

His mother. He had a family again.

Rollan eased himself onto his hands and knees, and started to creep toward his boots and cloak. The soft grass cuttings hushed beneath him. His hand pressed through the grass and hit a nail on the stable floor. Rollan's breath hissed with pain and he fell.

There was Meilin, her sleeping face turned toward him. He hadn't seen her look so peaceful, so content, in a long time. Not since before the Devourer and his forces had attacked them, unprovoked, and killed Meilin's father. Her family was gone, taken by the Conquerors, and now here his family was back, given to him by the same people.

He looked toward the door, his muscles shaking with the effort it took to remain still. His mother was out there, waiting, hopeful. But if he went to her, she would take him to Zerif and those other murderers.

He felt his leg muscles tense, ready to run to her anyway, so instead, there in the dark, he made a quick decision.

"Meilin," he whispered, shaking her sleeping form. "Meilin, wake up."

She bolted upright, hands defaulting into fists.

"We need to go," he whispered. "Now."

Meilin woke Tarik and Maya while Rollan shook Conor and Abeke. All put on their boots without asking questions.

They passed near the house where Aidana and her companions were sleeping. The window gaped open. Rollan's muscles still shook, but he kept his gaze straight and did not look inside — not to see her face one more time, to make sure she was okay. It was almost worse, not looking. In his mind he saw her sleeping restlessly, waking at dawn, looking for him. Finding him gone. But he kept walking on without a backward glance, and his heart tore just a little more.

Essix appeared, settling on his shoulder. The weight grounded his feet.

Abeke and Uraza led the way, the leopard's eyes detecting the best path in the dark. The pair was completely silent. Rollan followed Abeke through a break in

the fence and waited until Samis was out of sight before speaking.

“Thank you,” he said.

The group moved in closer to Rollan as they walked.

“For what?” Conor asked, keeping the farthest back, as if uneasy about walking near him.

“Thanks for trusting me that it was time to go.” Rollan pulled out the compass. “Pia gave this to me. I think it will lead us to Suka, and I didn’t dare risk Shane and the others overhearing us talk about it. I thought it best to leave while they slept.”

“Well done, Rollan,” said Tarik.

Rollan didn’t admit the other reason. Perhaps if he ran, suddenly and quickly, he’d have the strength to leave Aidana.

And perhaps someday when the war was over, she’d have the strength to leave Zerif. The idea of a family — his own family, his mother — was a greater draw than any talisman in the world.

Rollan fell in beside Conor as they walked.

“Hey, Conor,” Rollan said quietly. “Hey, Briggan.”

The wolf turned his head and looked at Rollan with those blue, unblinking eyes. Rollan sensed disapproval.

“Listen, I just wanted to apologize,” said Rollan. “I didn’t get it — what you did, giving up the Iron Boar to save your family. It seemed selfish to me at the time. And . . . well, I get it now. That it was the *opposite* of selfish.”

“Thanks,” Conor whispered. “But I know it was horrible of me —”

“It wasn’t horrible of you,” said Rollan. “Or at least not nearly as horrible as some of the other horrible things you’ve done before or since.”

Conor stared, stunned. “What?”

“That stew! That meat-grass abomination you made for us in Zhong was way more horrible. And that sheep joke you tell to everyone new we meet. Horrible! And your stench! Good gravy, it’s like the passed gas of the Devourer himself!”

Conor gave a half smile. “You like the sheep joke. I know you do. I’ve seen

you laugh.”

“Yeah, you got me,” said Rollan. “But anyway, the Boar thing? It was an impossible situation. And I’ve been a jerk to you. Sorry.”

Briggan trotted closer, letting his furry back rub beneath Rollan’s hand, and they walked in silence for a few moments. Briggan was big. Not Great Beast big, but still, fanged-and-furry-canine-predator big. On the streets, dogs were bad news. They’d fight you over scraps — or worse, chase you, snarling and rabid, one bite certain death. Now here Rollan was walking beside a wolf, his hand resting in his gray fur.

Uraza led the way with Abeke, but Meilin kept Jhi in her passive state. Rollan supposed the panda wouldn’t be able to keep their brisk pace, still Meilin rarely let her spirit animal out. Unlike Essix, who was *always* out.

Rollan could sense Essix off to his left somewhere, probably taking a rest in one of the trees, since she could fly faster than the group could walk. Rollan whistled three notes trailing up, their code for *Come here, please*.

He heard the response: one falcon screech trailing down — Essix’s way of laughing at him.

He hadn’t really expected her to come. But it would have been nice. The weight of the gyrfalcon on his shoulder might have distracted him from the stinging weight in his heart.

“Have you been wondering how Shane and Zerif and all those guys always show up wherever we are?” Conor asked suddenly.

“Um, yeah,” said Rollan. “You think someone is feeding them information?” Rollan couldn’t help glancing over at Abeke. She’d been awfully friendly with Shane.

“Not Abeke,” Conor insisted.

“Then who?”

No way it was Meilin. Or Tarik. Conor was just too honest and straightforward to be a spy, and Shane and Zerif had always seemed to find them

long before Maya had joined their group. Certainly it wasn't Rollan himself. There had to be some other explanation.

Tarik was leading the way, compass in hand.

"Normal compasses lead to the true north — the very top of the world," said Tarik. "This one appears to be leading us north-northwest. Perhaps it's tuned to Suka or her hiding place."

"It better be," Rollan muttered.



It was dawn when they reached the rocky northern coast of Eura. With a lightening of the sky came a salty breeze that whisked over Rollan's face, cold as a slap. At this point, only a narrow channel of the sea separated Eura from Arctica.

"There's a village on the shore across the water," Rollan said, shielding his eyes from the glare of the cold sun overhead.

"Where?" asked Conor, staring.

"Can't you see it?" Rollan pointed.

"I don't see any land at all," said Meilin. "Just the sea."

"Your vision is sharpening," said Tarik. "Interesting. Yes, my map says there is an Ardu village on the coast. The Ardu only live in Arctica, but for a price they will ferry people across the channel — usually Euran hunters looking for seals or walrus."

"Walrus," Rollan said with a snort. He was determined not to be gullible. There was no such thing as a huge-tusked sea elephant.

"We need a way to signal the Ardu village," said Tarik.

"I got this," said Maya. She held her hand out, and her salamander, Tini, scampered out of her sleeve and onto her palm. She whispered something to him, or breathed on him or something, and then carefully balled her hand into a fist with the salamander inside. She raised her fist above her head and Rollan heard a crackling sound, like the first twigs of a campfire catching heat. The air

around Maya curled with a smokeless heat, strands swirling, gathering slowly around her hand. He felt himself hypnotized, staring blankly at her shimmering fist. He started back a step when she opened her hand suddenly and a ball of fire the size of a saddlebag popped in the air above their heads. It rose, flickered for a moment, and then faded.

“That good enough?” Maya asked.

“I think so,” Tarik said, smiling.

Some time later, a petite, bearded man paddled over in a canoe. He wore a caribou-hide cap with long flaps over the ears that dangled almost to his shoulders. The canoe was built of hides stitched together and stretched across a frame of animal bones, almost as if the canoe were the carcass of some hollowed-out beast. It reeked of fish and blubber; it was clearly a fishing boat, but probably all the boats were fishing boats there. Rollan stepped in, wary of the way the boat moved with every small lap of water.

Space was tight, so Briggan and Uraza entered passive state on Conor’s and Abeke’s arms. Essix circled far above. Rollan smiled up. He felt a little grumpy with her for refusing to come, but if he could fly, he’d be up there too, finding a good breeze and letting it carry the weight away.

Tarik paid the man a gold coin. He dipped in his oar and paddled away from the Euran shore with surprising speed. Rollan looked back, half expecting to see his mother standing there in the mist. She wasn’t.

“Does everyone else have room for their feet, or am I the only one resting on a bed of dead fish?” Abeke asked.

“I’ve just been throwing the more disgusting ones out as we go,” Meilin said.

The Ardu oarsman paused. “Excuse me?”

“Oh,” Meilin said, and Rollan saw an expression flicker across her face that he couldn’t quite pin down. It looked like embarrassment, but Rollan didn’t think Meilin had experienced that particular emotion, ever. In her entire life. She cleared her throat and wiped her hands on the sides of the canoe. “I’m sorry.

That was probably your food. I swear they were just the mangled ones you wouldn't have wanted to eat."

The Ardu turned, examining the water behind them. "Not all creatures are so picky," he said.

Suddenly, the canoe lurched, as if struck by a large rock. But there were no rocks nearby — no shore, and no land. Only water and what might be in the water.

"Take this!" shouted the Ardu, giving Tarik the only other oar. "Strike it when it surfaces. Otherwise, paddle!"

Rollan and the others began to scan the water, moving about nervously. "Stay still," Tarik said. "You risk toppling the craft without the help of the beast."

"Beast?" Rollan asked. "What beast?"

"There are predators in the water, Rollan," said Tarik, "the same as on land."

A keening roar rose from the side of the craft and Tarik struck something in the water that sounded like the flank of a wet horse. Rollan grabbed a handful of fish from the bottom of the canoe. "Should I throw some out?" he yelled. "To distract it?"

"No!" shouted the oarsman and Tarik in unison.

What could they do? Uraza or Briggan couldn't fight a creature in the water. The talismans seemed useless here — the Granite Ram's leaping ability and Slate Elephant's power to enlarge a spirit animal offered no way to battle a sea creature. And how could they fight something they couldn't see?

There was another hard thump on the canoe. The Ardu kept paddling, faster and stronger than Rollan imagined someone that small and that old could manage.

Lumeo sat on Tarik's shoulder, and the man put his hands in the water.

"Tarik!" Conor shouted.

Rollan watched, eyes wide, waiting to see some great jawed creature bite off Tarik's hands. But instead the water around his wrists shuddered, as if a stone

had been dropped, sending out ripples on still water. Again, the ripples and a pulsing Rollan could feel beneath the boat.

“Tarik?” Abeke asked.

“Lumeo lends me some minor abilities with water,” said Tarik. “I’m thumping at the creature with a push of water, hopefully encouraging it to leave us alone.”

Several tense moments clawed past and the oarsman’s pace slowed.

“I can paddle,” Rollan said, worried the man was too tired to outrun whatever sea monster was chasing them.

“I’m sure you can, boy,” the man said. “But we wish to get to the shore, not splash about like a wounded seal.”

Rollan frowned.

“I believe we have outrun the creature,” Tarik said, and the Ardu grunted. “Or at least it lost interest.”

“Maybe don’t give the giant people-eating sea monsters any more treats,” Maya said, voice quivering. “Okay, Meilin?”

The motion of the sea started to make Rollan so queasy he forgot to be scared. Or sad. Or mad at the undervaluing of his paddling skills. At last the rocky shoreline came nearer.

“Hmm. I’d thought Arctica was all ice,” said Tarik.

“Oh, there’s plenty of ice, don’t worry about that,” said the Ardu with a mischievous smile.

“Wait, you haven’t ever been here before?” Rollan asked.

Tarik shook his head. “But I have longed to. I want to know Erdas in all her different forms of beauty.”

Rollan clambered out of the animal-skin boat and into the Ardu village. Small huts made of mud-and-grass bricks faced the sea. An elderly woman with bright blue eyes and a face like a raisin came out to meet them. Tarik spoke with her for some time, asking advice about how to survive in the icy north of Arctica.

“None live on the ice but those Ardu who bear a mark,” she said. “My son

drank the Nectar and bonded with a snow hare. He left us to live in the ice lands with his uncle, who had bonded with an ermine. Only those who have bonded with northern beasts can bear the eternal snows.”

“Have you visited their village?” Tarik asked.

The woman shook her head. “They come to visit us here. We wouldn’t know where to find them.”

It was good they had Pia’s compass, Rollan thought.

“There is much more hospitable land in Eura,” said Conor. “Why do you live here?”

“We love it here,” she said. “Our Marked relatives know where to find us. The wind and waters know us. And some nights, we lie back and watch the sky dance.”

Sky dance? Rollan wondered if the cold and loneliness were getting to the Ardu people’s heads.

The Ardu were happy to sell them provisions for the journey, as well as cold-weather gear — hooded cloaks made from thick caribou fur, gloves extending nearly to the elbow, high boots with roughshod soles, the nails hammered only halfway through to better grip the ice.

So much leather and fur; Rollan was sweating immediately, drops rolling down his back. It tickled and itched, as if spiders crawled beneath his clothes, and he cursed the ridiculously heavy clothing. Give him cold over heat any day.

Within a few hours he’d changed his mind.

Dirt led to snow, which led to ice. Endless ice, more than an ocean’s worth, it seemed to Rollan.

The ice was mostly flat, with subtle rises and crests, as if mimicking the waves of a gentle sea. A fine layer of snow lay over the ice, chased by flickers of wind. The sunlight was bright, reflecting off a white world so that there was nowhere to look that didn’t hurt the eye. After several hours of walking, Rollan closed his eyes and tried walking blind.

Rollan squinted his eyes open to get his bearings and noticed spots of black

on the ice in the distance. Then they moved. The black spots were a nose and eyes.

“Polar bear,” Tarik whispered.

“Suka?” asked Meilin.

Tarik shook his head. “Far too small. But even a regular polar bear is the most fearsome predator on land. We would be wise to avoid it.”

They took a longer route, attempting to stay away from the polar bear’s hunting ground, and then continued on north. They walked a half hour in peace until a snowbank immediately to their left unexpectedly moved, proving it had not been a snowbank at all. The polar bear rose to its full height, and the team froze. This terrifying creature couldn’t be a “regular” polar bear, could it?

“Suka?” Rollan squeaked.

The bear opened a mouth the size of Jhi’s entire head and roared. Rollan noticed blood staining the fur around the bear’s mouth, and he drew back in terror. The bear lunged and swatted with a long arm, the black claws of its paw just missing Rollan. He had already stumbled backward in fright, and now fell flat onto the ice.

But Briggan moved in fast, hunched low, warning the bear off with a growl-bark-bark, growl-bark-bark. Uraza was loose and crouched, a threat gurgling in her throat. Maya fumbled off her gloves, closed her eyes, and smacked the fist of her right hand into the palm of the left. Sparks exploded out from her body like someone dropping a heavy log on a dying fire. The sight was spectacular, but the sparks dissipated quickly, even before hitting the ground. The bear watched the sparks fade, and then swung one heavy paw at a nearby snowbank, icy snow cracking with a sound like broken bones. Snow showered over the team, and chunks of ice went flying.

A piece the size of his fist struck Rollan in the shoulder, and he sprawled back to the ground. When he wiped the snow from his eyes, he saw the bear several meters off, lumbering away in no apparent hurry. The polar bear, it seemed, had no predator to fear among their group.

They all watched in silence as the bear disappeared into the white plain, its fur indistinguishable from the Arctican surroundings.

“That was my big move,” Maya whispered. “And it didn’t even flinch.”

“That was a regular polar bear?” said Rollan. “It was . . . *huge*.”

“Suka will be much, much larger,” said Tarik.

With Briggan alert for polar bears, sniffing and stopping to look as they walked, Rollan soon fell into a drowsy complacency. Surely no other danger could accost them out here. After all, nothing was visible but flat ice for miles and miles.

The walk was beyond wearying. The scenery never changed — just whiteness, the glare of sunlight. Beneath all those layers, he was sweating, feeling sticky and itchy across his back and under his arms. But his uncovered face was glaringly cold, nose running and eyes streaming, teeth in a permanent state of chatter.

“Meilin, did any of your tutors in Zhong teach you how to keep from shivering? I could use a lesson.”

There was a sound to his left like a huff of breath and a moan. Was she annoyed with him for just asking that? He turned, feeling surprisingly hurt, and saw no Meilin at all.

“Meilin?” he said.

No sign of her. Anywhere. Rollan’s stomach plunged. He shouted for her, hurrying back toward where he’d last noticed her out of the corner of his eye. He tended to keep Meilin in the corner of his eye a lot lately.

Essix screeched, startling Rollan as she landed on his shoulder. Her talons pressed against the front of his shoulder, as if warning him back. With the contact, his vision became even sharper, his awareness of his surroundings increased. He detected now a subtle difference in the ice that lay before him. And beyond it, a hole.

Carefully walking around the different-looking ice, he moved toward the hole. Lying on his stomach, he peered down.

A crevasse about two feet wide and perhaps a hundred feet long had riven the solid ice. A thick layer of ice and snow had coated over it, camouflaging it with the nearly identical solid ground. The crevasse was so deep that sunlight couldn't reach the bottom. And Meilin was clinging to the rough edge of the crevasse's icy cliff, about ten feet down. She looked up at him, her face a mask of panic, her frown frozen. She seemed unable to speak, to move, to do anything but keep gripping the tiny ledges in the ice. One slip and she'd fall.

"Meilin!" Rollan shouted. "Help, she's fallen!"

Rollan almost called for the Slate Elephant. Wearing it would make Essix large enough to carry Meilin, but the crevasse was too narrow. Great Essix's wingspan would be too wide to fit.

But apparently Abeke had had the same idea, because Rollan heard rolling thunder beside him.

It was Uraza. Great Uraza. *Huge* Uraza. Clearly Abeke was wearing the Slate Elephant, making her spirit animal the size of a Great Beast. The deepest parts of Rollan wanted to scream and run from the enormous thing charging at him, but he just stared. Uraza was like a monster from a storybook, a giant terror that shouldn't exist. He watched as a tremendous paw landed next to him, each claw the size of a man's arm, cracking into the ice, anchoring the giant cat to the frozen plain.

Uraza's huge shoulder muscles rolled as she crouched and extended one long arm. She couldn't quite reach Meilin. She crouched even closer to the cliff, knocking bits of ice down the crevasse. She reached lower. Her paw just managed to extend to Meilin's shoulder. Meilin hesitated to let go of her precarious hold on the cliff to grab the paw. Rollan heard her short, panicked breaths.

"Let go, Meilin," he said. "She's got you. Let go. It's going to be okay."

Though he didn't feel like it'd be okay. Meilin was one inch from falling into a bottomless crevasse.

"Okay." Meilin breathed out. She let go, clawing at Uraza's paw, hanging on

by gripping handfuls of fur.

Uraza pulled her up slightly, curled her paw, and then batted her into the air as if she were a toy ball. Meilin rose, flying out of the crevasse, emitting a strangled scream. Uraza caught her in her paws, setting her down on the ice.

“Are you okay?” Rollan asked. “Are you all right? Meilin?”

Meilin stood on her feet, straightening her spine.

“I feel . . . a great deal . . . like a mouse,” she said, wobbling slightly.

“What happened?” Conor asked.

Meilin cleared her throat, as if trying to get her voice to stop shaking. “It would seem that some ice is false ice. Covering deep holes.”

Uraza began shivering, and the ground shuddered with the sheer magnitude of it. Abeke lifted the Slate Elephant so it was no longer in contact with her skin, and Uraza flickered back to big-kitty size. Then Abeke pulled up the sleeve of her coat, and the leopard became a mark on her skin. “Some of us are more accustomed to warmth,” she said.

“My pack fell down,” Meilin said. “And with it, a third of our food.”

Everyone groaned. They’d been traveling light as it was. Tarik had them all unpack, divvying up the remaining food equally between all the packs.

“It was foolish of me to put all the food in only three packs,” he said. “I’m sorry, team, but the days will be lean.”

Rollan shouldered his new pack, full of food, a bedroll, and part of their tent. It was heavy, though he wished it were heavier with food. He got an uncomfortable feeling they were about to starve in this icy desert.

Tarik brought out his long, thin rope, knotting it through everyone’s belt with several feet between.

“Better keep animals in passive form,” he said. “We don’t have enough rope to secure them to us . . . or food to spare to feed them.”

“Sure, let me just . . .” Rollan pulled up his sleeve, whistling to Essix. She whistled back that dipping, laughing note. “Huh, Essix won’t obey me. What a shocker.”

“We don’t even know how far we have to go,” said Conor. “We could run out of food before reaching Suka!”

“Do you wish to return?” asked Tarik.

Conor considered, then shook his head. He pulled up his sleeve and Briggan disappeared.

Rollan sighed and looked up at Essix.

“Did you see that, girl?” Rollan said. “Come on now, you pretty birdie.” He offered her his arm with his most charming smile on his face.

Essix landed on his shoulders and ruffled his hair with her beak, like an older sibling rubbing a fist against a younger brother’s head. A gyrfalcon was native to northern climates anyway. And she could hunt for herself. Passive state offered her nothing that she wanted or needed.

Though for Rollan, the ache in his chest still as real as the ice beneath his feet, the chance to be unconscious for a while sounded like bliss.



They camped each night, all six huddled in their small tent. Rollan was too cold to sleep deeply, too aware of the others twitching in their sleep, breathing, snoring. Each morning he woke up feeling as if he’d been in an overnight street brawl.

All day they walked, the monotony of ice, snow, and hunger interspersed with the constant threat of death by falling.

Tarik had rationed the food to a hand’s breadth of meat jerky, one dry travel biscuit, and one apple each day. Hungry and bored, they played a game as they walked called Best Meal Ever.

“Hot pepper sauce over antelope steak,” Abeke said. “Heaps and heaps of black grapes. Honeyed bread braids with goat’s milk pudding.”

“Just bread,” Rollan said, brushing snow off his coat. “A huge loaf of hot bread, crusty on the outside, soft as a sigh on the inside, smeared with melty butter and a great deal of raspberry preserves.”

“Raw, fresh tuna, juiced with lemon and ginger, over a hot bed of sweet rice,” said Meilin. “Mangoes so fresh they’re creamy, and —”

Meilin dropped.

“Crevasse!” Rollan shouted. “Hurry! Crevasse, cre-vasse!”

He held tight to the end of his rope that secured him to Meilin and was scrambling for a foothold on the ice. The others were digging in too, Conor beside him, but the rope was slack. Meilin hadn’t fallen down a crevasse.

Meilin stood up, dusting herself off.

“I just tripped,” she said. “How embarrassing.”

Rollan was the one who felt embarrassed at his overreaction. He felt his cheeks coloring. “So, um, Conor said you keep falling because you’re so heavy, but I defended your honor,” he said, helping brush snow and ice chunks off her hood and arms.

“I said no such thing!” Conor shouted, and Rollan gave him a grin.

“I am heavy,” she said. “It’s all these brains.”

She tried to smile at Rollan, and the failure of it made his chest ache anew.

They began walking again. Rollan tried whistling quietly to Essix. If the falcon sat on his shoulder, he might be able to detect the crevasses before Meilin fell again. Essix swooped down, knocking his hood back with the air of her passing, but wouldn’t land.

“Mutton pie,” Conor was saying, “with egg-basted flaky crust, stuffed full of tender mutton and potatoes and carrots and covered in thick, hot, salty gravy.”

Rollan had never tried mutton. The Greencloaks served it sometimes at Greenhaven Castle, but with so many other choices, he’d turned away from meat that smelled exactly like what it was — old sheep. But just then, mutton sounded like the best idea since —

There was no ground. Rollan was falling.

“Crevasse!” he heard someone shout from above.

All he could see was a rush of blue ice and blackness under his feet. He felt his gut loosen and the muscles along his spine tighten and twitch, as if trying to

flap wings he did not have. His entire body ached with an explosion of fear, bursting out from the center of his body. The world was quiet and as slow as an exhale, and he seemed to have a lifetime of a moment to realize that he was about to die. No ground beneath him. Nothing but darkness —

A hard yank on his middle. Though it'd felt like forever, he'd only fallen as far as the rope between him and Meilin. Through the crack he heard more shouts now. They sounded desperate.

He held on to the rope, scrambling with his feet on the ice wall, trying to find traction that did not come. His feet kept slipping.

A sound like thunder and then Great Uraza's paw lowered. Rollan reached up, the cat stretched down, but they were still a foot apart. The rope was too long.

Rollan clawed at the ice wall, hoping to find a handhold, but just drew back a chunk of ice.

"I can't get up!" he yelled. "I'm stuck! I'm stuck!"

"Take a deep breath," he heard Tarik call. "We'll pull and you'll push. We've got you."

Rollan breathed, shallow gasps leading to one slow, deep inhale. This was not a street crew, ready to abandon him at the first sign of trouble. They had him. They would not let him fall.

He felt a pull on his middle, and he angled his feet to climb the side of the crevasse and then haul himself back onto land. He brushed himself off with shaking hands. Essix landed on his shoulder.

"Hey, Essix, great job scouting for crevasses," he muttered.

Essix nuzzled her beak into his hood, bit onto a hair, and yanked it out.

"Ow," he said, but something about the gesture actually seemed sweet.

"That was horrifying," said Maya, staring aghast at the hole that had almost been Rollan's grave. She started to walk, pacing in a circle. "I mean, that was really, really horrifying. I hate heights. And you'd think here on the ground you'd be safe from heights but then those holes appear like monsters from beneath, ready to grab you and —"

“Maya!” With Essix on his shoulder, Rollan could see a slight difference in the ice. “Maya, stop!”

Maya froze. She looked at Rollan with wide eyes and then down by her feet. She stomped her foot near the crevasse and a chunk of ice tumbled away, and down, and down, into a hole that had not been there a moment ago. She watched the ice fall, through loose strands of red hair fallen out of her hood and whipping against her face in the wind.

Tarik put his arm around her shoulders and helped her slowly step back.

“Good catch, Rollan,” Tarik said. “Let’s keep moving.”

“Pear-and-cream-cheese tarts,” Maya said, her voice trembling. “And an entire roast chicken.”

After a few more falls and near misses, the group was exhausted. But they had no choice but to keep trudging forward. Even with his sharpened vision, Rollan could see nothing but ice desert in every direction. He was too tired, too hungry, too hopeless to find any joke in the matter.

At least Essix must be getting fed. She left him to fly out, returning perhaps an hour later to sit on his shoulder.

But Rollan noticed he hadn’t seen any blood on Essix’s beak or talons, smelled no meat on her breath.

“Couldn’t find anything out there?” Rollan asked softly.

Perhaps offended, Essix took flight.

“Wait,” said Rollan. He sighed heavily and put his mitten in his pocket, pulling out his rationed piece of jerky for the day. His stomach instantly growled, as if furious with him. But Rollan held it aloft.

Essix swooped back, taking the jerky with her beak. She sat on his shoulder while eating it primly, holding the jerky in one talon.

Rollan’s stomach protested again, and Essix stopped eating, as if she’d heard. There was one small shred of jerky left. She held it in her beak and tucked it into his mouth as if he were a baby bird. Rollan made a noise of surprise, but Essix chirped insistently, so he chewed.

Essix stayed on his shoulder for the rest of the day. With her near, Rollan led the way, able to detect the difference in the ice that hid the crevasses.

That night, the others were so exhausted they fell asleep at once. Though Rollan's body felt bruised and spent, his mind couldn't stop thinking.

Ma, he thought.

Had he done the right thing to run away?

The Bile cures bonding sickness, he thought. My mother returned for me. Are the Conquerors really just "Bad Guys"?

He knew he was doing good with the Greencloaks, but there was more to the story than they were telling him, and that made him nervous.

He slipped out of the tent to search for Essix, but looked up with a gasp.

At first he thought smoke filled the sky — only the smoke was green and tinged with purple. But the colors moved like a slow-flowing river, lower than the stars. Arctica was wild, wicked, and dangerous, but he understood a bit why the Ardu stayed. He leaned back, looking up as long as his legs would allow.

Rollan smiled. And the sky danced.



COMPASS

THEIR FIFTH DAY IN ARCTICA DAWNED WITH A STRANGE GREEN hue. Abeke stared through the flap of the tent at the unnatural shade of sky, trying to warm herself with it, convince herself she was okay. She didn't remember sleeping all night. It felt more like she'd been knocked over the head and thrown onto the ground and had just laid there, feeling woozy with cold.

She exhaled heavily and watched her breath crystallize in the air above her and then snow back down onto her face.

Full morning came; the sunlight turned bright gold, but the air felt no warmer. Still, Abeke told herself she was okay. At least a mountain range in the distance now gave them a destination to walk toward in the otherwise endlessly flat ice.

The imaginary-meal game continued.

"For the seventh course," Rollan was saying, "trout in a great deal of butter and stuffed with lemons and thyme, broiled till its skin is crispy."

Abeke was too cold to be hungry. She was shivering so hard, she tripped and fell three times in one hour.

The third time, Conor helped her back up.

"Are you okay?" he said.

Yes, she was okay. Hadn't she been telling herself that for days? Surely the others were as cold as she was. Just because she'd grown up in the hot plains of Nilo didn't mean she couldn't handle a few days on ice. But she couldn't get any of those words through her chattering jaw.

Conor frowned, removed his scarf, and started to wrap it around her neck. Abeke was surprised how much warmer she already felt. She tried to move her lips into a smile, though they felt like ice. Conor smiled back anyway. To Abeke, family had meant a father and a sister who lived in the same house, ate with her, scolded her, wished her different. Not until meeting Conor had she understood what it might be like to have a brother. Not till knowing him and the others had she begun to imagine a different kind of family.

She started to say "thank you" but surprised herself by saying instead, "I haven't been able to feel my feet for a long time."

"Sit down," Tarik ordered at once.

He pulled off her boot and sock, and Abeke sucked in her breath. While her skin was naturally deep brown, her toes had turned an unnatural black.

"Frostbite," said Tarik. He began to vigorously rub her feet, and his touch felt like hot daggers. Abeke pressed her lips together to keep from screaming.

"I know it hurts," Tarik said, "but we have to get blood flowing again or you could lose your toes. Or even more."

Conor sat beside Tarik, removed Abeke's other boot and sock, and began rubbing. Now Abeke did cry out. The pain was one thing, but the humiliation was almost unbearable.

"I . . ." she began, leaning forward.

"Stop it," Conor said, almost as if he knew what she was thinking. "On a snowy night watch, Euran shepherds can get frostbite. I've done this before, so stop worrying and just let me help."

Abeke covered her face with her hands. In one way, a boy her own age was rubbing her foot and that made her want to dig a hole to crawl in and die. In

another, her friend Conor was rubbing her foot, which was one of the kindest, most humble things anyone had ever done for her.

This is what family does, she thought.

Shane had said to her, so long ago now it seemed, that they must find family wherever they could.

She lowered her hands from her face.

“Thank you,” she managed to say at last.

Her feeling restored, they all hobbled on, finally reaching the mountain range that had been on the horizon for two days. It wasn't until she stood at its base that Abeke really understood its height.

“I would never attempt to scale such a mountain if our compass did not point that way,” said Tarik. “We don't have enough food stores to waste time looking for a way around.”

Mountain was perhaps the wrong word, because Abeke could detect no rock in it. It seemed, rather, that long ago in a great act of violence something had erupted up from below, pushing a range of ice onto the surface. Huge shafts of deep blue ice jutted together, building up and rising so high that Abeke expected to see clouds at the peak.

They all sighed.

“Up?” said Meilin.

They began to climb.

Abeke instantly wished for Uraza. With the enhanced abilities the leopard's presence gave her, Abeke would have no trouble leaping from pinnacle to pinnacle. But it was too cold for the leopard, and there was no food for her.

They climbed for hours, and though they were so far above the tundra floor that looking down made Abeke feel dizzy, they didn't seem to be any closer to the peak. Staying roped together saved them again and again. Climbing on ice was just a bit slippery.

By evening Abeke felt so weak her forearms shook, even when she wasn't gripping ice. The others were flagging too.

“Camp!” Tarik called.

“What camp? How?” Rollan said. “We’re on the side of an ice mountain!”

Tarik handed him what looked like a nail used to build a house for a giant. “Take the mallet from your pack,” he said, “and hammer the tent’s corner to the ice.”

In a matter of minutes, their tent was hanging like a curtain off the side of the mountain, the six of them behind it.

“Cozy,” said Rollan.

Abeke and Conor looked at him like he was insane.

“Joking,” he muttered, as if out of energy to explain, lie, or continue the joke.

Tarik slid along the cliffside and pointed at a spot, speaking to Maya. She placed her hands on the ice, a dim glow visible between her fingertips. With a crack-bubble-hiss, ice changed to water and water to steam, forming an indentation in the ice that to Abeke looked just big enough for a loaf of bread.

“No larger,” Tarik said, and Maya made five more.

“What are these for?” Meilin asked.

“These are your beds for the night,” Tarik said, cramming his own backside into one of the divots.

“Beds?” Rollan said. “I’d be lucky to be able to sit in something that small.”

“Then, they are your chairs for the night,” Tarik said. “Get some rest as best you can.”

Abeke had just drifted asleep when a sound like tiny fists punching at the tent woke her. Peering out from under the flap, she looked up the mountainside to see thousands of chunks of ice rolling down.

“AVALAN — !” she started to yell, but Tarik reached over and grabbed her arm.

“Peace,” he said. “It is only a hailstorm. Falling ice. Frozen rain.”

Ice falling from the sky? Abeke leaned back into her hollow of ice, trying again to sleep. The side of a cliff wasn’t her idea of cozy. She could feel the cold creeping back into her boots, working again at her toes.



They all rose at dawn, exhausted but tired of trying to sleep. The short night had worn them down, like wind beats at sandstone, and every step felt like trying to roll a boulder. Abeke was just about to say she wasn't sure she could make it, when Conor slipped.

He was roped between Maya and Rollan, but they were too groggy to catch him. The weight of three people pulled on Abeke's rope. She couldn't stop her slide. She scrambled for a hold, anything, her feet skimming over clear blue ice, and then came the sickening feeling of a fall.

She jerked to a stop, the rope digging into her waist with the force of her own weight. She gasped, trying to reclaim the breath yanked out of her, dangling above a cliff. She looked up. Tarik was braced against an ice boulder, straining to keep hold of the cord that secured them all together. And he was slipping. Abeke's unsupported weight was too much to hold on the slope of ice. Her weight was going to pull him after her, and with him, Meilin. Abeke pulled her knife from her belt sheath and cut the rope.

"No!" said Tarik.

But Abeke was already falling. She seemed to go a long way before suddenly thudding onto Rollan, who was perched on a ledge ten feet down. Her head hurt. Her knife was gone, knocked from her hand in the impact, and inches from her head, a sheer wall of ice dropped down two hundred feet. She didn't dare to so much as twitch, afraid she'd slide again.

Meilin and Tarik stood above, eyes wide and desperate.

"Rollan, use the Slate Elephant!" said Meilin.

Now that Meilin said it, Abeke wondered how she hadn't thought to suggest that before. The lack of food was making her thoughts sluggish, and great ideas seemed to be as far away as warmth.

"It's in my pack," said Rollan.

There was no hope in his words. Rollan was gripping the ice as firmly as she, inches from sliding down the cliff.

“Where’s the Granite Ram?” said Abeke.

“I have it,” said Tarik.

“Give it to Abeke!” said Rollan. “Get her to safety and hopefully Essix will cooperate and fly it back to someone else.”

Tarik carefully dropped the Granite Ram to Abeke, mindful of the cliff. Abeke didn’t take time to put the chain around her neck, slipping the talisman directly inside her coat. She winced at the cold touch of stone against her skin. Instantly she felt confidence in her limbs. Her eyes seemed to adjust, as if seeing the world not as a series of objects but spaces between perches.

Carefully she moved off Rollan. What had seemed a treacherous cliffside now felt comfortable. She offered Rollan her hand, helping him to his feet and to a slightly safer ledge.

She adjusted her feet, preparing for a jump, but the movement sent her sliding off the ledge. Facing a hundred-foot drop, Abeke slammed her foot down and leaped.

Her legs no longer shook from exhaustion. Her mind felt firm. She knew exactly what she was capable of, and she leaped up the mountainside, covering in minutes a distance that had taken them hours.

She paused briefly at the summit to see if the view revealed anything of their location and Suka’s hiding place. But all she could see was more icy tundra.

Down she jumped, from ice outcropping to thin ledge to precarious ice boulder, with a speed and balance that filled her with awe.

She landed on the flat ground and looked up, searching for Essix.

She waited. No gyrfalcon. The Granite Ram was useless if she was left alone on the safe side of the mountain.

Then, a slow, circling shape. Essix landed near her. She didn’t look at Abeke, as if pretending she was just hanging out on an ice boulder for her own

amusement. But when Abeke held out the Granite Ram, Essix grabbed the cord and flew back up the mountainside.

By the time the final party member had hopped down the mountain, they began to set up camp in earnest. Real camp, with an upright tent and flat spaces to sleep. Maya made a fire to warm them, though without fuel to burn she could not keep it up forever. Still, she melted ice in their cups and they all had a hearty drink of warm water before bed.

Abeke woke on the sixth morning firmly believing today the grueling journey would end. Suka was near. The compass seemed to indicate that. A couple of hours into their walk, the compass began to twitch softly in Tarik's hand. Two more hours after that, it was constantly vibrating.

So everyone's eyes were on the compass when, all of a sudden, it shook so hard the cover flipped open. Inside what should have been solid metal was a hollow compartment.

Tarik sucked in his breath. Abeke leaned closer as he pulled a scrap of paper out. He unfolded it, revealing two handwritten words: I'M SORRY.



THE ARDU

FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS, NO ONE SPOKE. CONOR COULDN'T read the words on the note, but he guessed it couldn't be good. The compass had broken open. They were stranded in the middle of an ice continent, and there was no sign of Suka.

"No," Meilin whispered. "No, that can't be right. That can't . . ."

Maya began to weep. Abeke could not seem to move. Rollan crouched down and punched at the ice.

"Rollan . . ." Tarik began.

"I didn't see it," said Rollan. "I was distracted by my — by that woman Aidana, and I didn't notice Pia enough. She must have been lying. If only I'd looked. I'm so sorry."

Abeke kept shaking her head. Meilin was turning slowly in circles as if looking for something in that wasteland of ice.

Conor saw nothing. A mountain range. A horizon. No city, nobody, no escape. Even if they walked south again, they'd run out of food long before returning to Eura. All this time wasted, Conquerors on the move. Perhaps that rascal Shane

had already found Suka while the Greencloaks were wandering aimlessly through the most miserable landscape in Erdas.

Conor sat down as if pushed by a huge weight. He'd left home, abandoned his family, with the hope that his mission was noble. To die listlessly on a sea of ice wasn't noble. It was pathetic.

"Still longing to see Arctica, Tarik?" said Rollan. "Still eager to know Erdas in all her different forms of beauty?"

Tarik opened his mouth but then seemed to change his mind about what he would say. "Essix, perhaps, could help?" he said softly.

"Essix, can you see anything?" Rollan asked. "Please, fly high and use those sharp eyes."

When Essix complied, Conor felt worse. Even Essix must have realized how dire the situation was to do as Rollan asked without so much as a squawk.

With no better plan, they sat and waited, eating their meager rations for the day. Conor hoped his stale biscuit and bit of jerky would digest into energy and faith, but his sore stomach just absorbed them like desert soil absorbs a cup of water, none the better for it. Maya warmed the group with brief bursts of fire and tried to renew the meal game, but the thought of food was too depressing.

Tarik examined the compass, taking it apart piece by piece. "It was a real compass once, but Pia damaged it. It was leading us to nowhere."

"She never intended to help us," said Rollan.

"She would lead us to our deaths to protect her own artificially extended life," said Meilin, her voice as hard as ice.

Maya paced, and her breathing sounded strained, as if tightened against a sob.

Essix landed on Rollan's shoulder some time later. His shoulders slumped, making clear that Essix had seen nothing of use.

"At the top of the mountain, I didn't see signs of any city either," said Conor.

"What city?" said Rollan. "There aren't any cities in Arctica."

"No, I mean the Ice City. The song says that the Great Polar Bear sleeps in the Ice City."

“If the song is true,” said Rollan.

“Songs are always true, in their way,” said Conor.

Abeke nodded, and Conor felt encouraged to go on.

“I mean, the song is how we knew about Suka’s connection to Samis, and it was right about that. She wasn’t there, but she *had* been. Maybe there’s other truth in the words.”

Conor cleared his throat, gripped his crook, and began to sing. He didn’t have a strong voice, but shepherds sang, so he had lots of practice, though he wasn’t used to any audience besides a lot of disinterested sheep.

West of the sun, north of the drink

Over the backbone of ice

Deep in the rime without a blink

The polar bear sleeps in ice

In Samis home where she was known

They honor her with each breath

The bear breathes not one of her own

In the Ice City free from death

Hidden from the ruinous wind

They chisel city from snow —

“Wait, do you think *drink* could mean ocean?” said Meilin. “Because we’re already north of the ‘drink.’ ”

“That range of mountains could be the backbone of ice,” said Abeke.

“So we’re looking for an ice city,” said Conor.

“Where?” said Rollan.

“Well, we’re already north of the ice mountains,” said Conor. “The other clue is —”

“West,” said Tarik.

“Yes, and there’s a line in the last verse about ‘the waters lap the falling sun.’ I bet Suka is nearer the western shore of Arctica.”

“At the very least, the coast should provide us better hunting,” said Tarik.

“Any hunting,” Rollan muttered.

So they struck west. And walked. And walked. The sun full in their face at sunset and pressing against their backs at sunrise.

Conor tried not to count the days. Numbers made him feel hopeless. Numbers like two, as in two biscuits left, and zero, as in zero apples in his pack.

And the morning they ate the last rations of food, someone began to cry. Maybe, Conor wondered, he was the one crying. Or maybe they all were. He didn’t have the strength to look up and see.

A screech startled him.

Essix was returning from one of her many scouting flights. But this time she was gripping something white in her talons. As she swooped down, Conor saw it was a snow fox. Hardly enough to feed six people, but the idea of even a little fresh meat made his stomach squeeze so tightly in anticipation he doubled over in pain.

But then, the fox wriggled. Essix hadn’t killed it. She was hovering before Conor, batting her wings quickly against the incoming wind to hold her position.

“Take it,” Rollan insisted. “Essix wants you to do something.”

“Oh!” Conor grabbed the fox from Essix, holding it tight. Outside Samis, Briggan had turned the pack of wolves away from the caribou herd. Perhaps Essix knew that Briggan had some influence with other canines. “Rollan, pull up my sleeve.”

When his forearm was exposed, Conor released Briggan. The wolf shook his body, as if drying his fur after a bath, and immediately began prancing about, more like a playful puppy than an adult wolf.

“Briggan! I know you’re happy to be out, but can you talk to the fox? Find out if it knows where to find Suka? Or, find *anywhere* really. Someplace we can get food and shelter.”

Briggan sniffed the fox, howled, and then paced a quick circle.

“I think he wants me to put the fox down,” said Conor.

The moment Conor loosened his hold on the fox, it leaped onto the ground,

stared at Briggan for a moment, and then took off to the west.

“Come on!” Conor said, running after it.

A destination fed his limbs better than a dry biscuit and bit of jerky.

The weary, half-starved humans couldn’t keep running for long. They slowed, and Briggan followed the scent of the fox, who was now far out of sight. Though surely not as strong as Briggan’s sense of smell, Conor’s own had sharpened so that he thought he too could detect a slight musk on the ice.

Rollan was the first to see something on the horizon. As they drew nearer, Conor made out about a dozen low structures with rounded tops. They were built from the ice itself — blocks cut out, stacked, and sealed together with ice.

“The Ice City!” said Conor.

“If that’s a city, then I’m an army,” said Rollan.

Several dogs had shown themselves, barking madly at the travelers. People stood behind the dogs, ivory-tipped spears and bone knives in hand. Conor could see many other animals — snow foxes, Arctican gulls, seals, snow hares and snowy owls, ermines, a musk ox, and two tall, great-antlered caribou.

“An Ardu settlement,” Tarik said. “I can’t imagine they’ll take kindly to strangers.”

Briggan trotted forward and barked too. The dogs yipped, then quieted.

An Ardu man with a spear came forward. The thick fur of his hood nearly hid his face, but Conor could see his pale eyes widen.

“Briggan,” the man said in awe.

He turned to the other people, speaking hurriedly.

“Time to impress,” Rollan whispered.

Meilin sighed and released Jhi. Abeke let out Uraza, who stretched and yawned as if she’d just been napping. Essix settled onto Rollan’s shoulder, playing along.

The Ardu leader laid down his spear on the ice. Behind him, the rest tossed down spears and bows, and Jhi and the other spirit animals returned to passive state.

“The Four Fallen!” said the man.

“Yes,” said Tarik. “They have returned and bonded to these special children. We need your help —”

The man raised his hand for silence. “The help you need immediately is food and warmth.”

Tarik nodded, grateful. With the promise of rest, Conor felt the strength drain out of him, leaving his arms and legs cold. Maya collapsed against the ice.

Tarik and Conor helped Maya up, and the Ardu led them inside one of the small, domed houses. There was room for all six to sit, leaning against the walls of ice. An Ardu woman set a wide, shallow pan of seal fat on the floor and lit it. A smoky fire burned happily, warming the space. Soon Conor was drinking a mug of warm broth. The heat made him sleepy. He finished the drink and lay down. He heard someone else begin to snore, just before sinking into sleep himself.



He must have slept the rest of the day, and all night too, because when Conor awoke, it was morning. He stretched, luxuriating in the unfamiliar sensation of a great sleep. Their nights on the fields of ice felt like a long nightmare, and any sleep managed had been thin and cold, a ghost of itself.

Tarik, Abeke, and Rollan were also awake, and Conor crawled outside to meet them. He stretched again, just to feel alive.

“Not to trouble you,” Rollan was saying to the Ardu chief, “but breakfast?”

The chief laughed. “First, we hunt so we can feast the heroes.”

The Ardu hunters were already outfitted with spears and harpoons and setting off.

“We should go too,” Tarik whispered. “Hunting with the Ardu might help them trust us with any knowledge of Suka.”

So the four of them followed the hunters. Conor did his best to appear energetic and competent, but he imagined the hunters to be silently laughing at

the awkward children stumbling across the tundra.

He had hoped it would be a short journey, but they walked an hour or more, during which Briggan looked like the only one of them having fun. The wolf would run ahead, diving headlong into snowdrifts and pouncing on things in the distance that might have been mice, or might have been nothing. Suddenly Uraza pounced, rolling Briggan in the snow. She pressed her paws against his chest and bared her teeth in what Conor could swear was a smile. The wolf yipped and scrambled free, and the two animals began to roll around and play-bite each other like a couple of pups.

“Mine could take yours,” Abeke whispered.

“No way. Dog beats cat,” said Conor.

One of the hunters shouted as if announcing a find. As they caught up, Conor could see a hole in the ice, blue water filling it. Apparently in this part of Arctica, ice extended out over the ocean.

“A breath hole,” Tarik said. “Seals, whales, and walruses who live in the ocean beneath the ice need to come up for air.”

Rollan snorted as if Tarik had told a joke. “Walruses . . .” he whispered.

The hunter motioned everyone down with his hand, pointing at Briggan specifically and putting a finger to his lips. He then lay down himself. From a distance, in his brown furs and on his side, he resembled a seal reclining on the ice. The teammates all did the same.

Conor lay with Briggan on one side, Abeke the other.

“More walking and cozying up on ice isn’t the best for frozen toes,” he said. “I’d hoped you’d get to stay at their village and stay warm.”

“I’m okay,” she said. “I’ll just do my best to keep my feet from freezing. I don’t want you to have to rub them again.”

“Me either,” he said, then felt stupid for saying it. It might have sounded to her like he hated the task, but he really just didn’t want her to get frostbite again.

He cringed behind his fur collar and waited.

And waited.

And waited, while his nose itched and his feet grew colder. This was a waste of time. Briggan was getting fidgety and so was he. They needed to find Suka! They needed to be up and fighting and stopping the Devourer —

A splash. A slick, brown seal nosed up out of the water, flopping onto the ice. No one moved. Two more seals followed. Still no one moved. Had they fallen asleep?

And then, as if by some soundless command, the hunters jumped to their feet, spears in hand, spirit animals appearing. The seals darted back to the holes, but the hunters threw their spears. Three spears struck the three seals, the wide ends catching. The seals slipped back into the water, while the hunters clung to the ropes that were attached to their spears. Other Ardu rushed forward, hammering small metal stakes into the ice. The hunters holding the ropes pressed their boots against the stakes to keep from sliding on the ice and being pulled into the water hole.

Conor and the others were all on their feet, ready to help, but soon the thrashing on the other end of the ropes stopped. The hunters pulled the seals back onto the ice and exclaimed, clapping each other on the shoulders.

Despite his hunger, the violence of the hunting bothered him. He hid a shudder, glancing at Abeke. While he'd been tending sheep in Eura, she'd been hunting antelope in Nilo.

"I guess it's the only way they eat," said Conor. "No way to farm up here. Either they catch seals or starve."

Briggan padded around, sniffing the seals while the hunters lashed them with rope, in preparation for a long walk back.

Briggan stopped sniffing and stiffened, head cocked. Listening.

"What is it, Brig?" Conor asked. Then he heard something too. A low groan, like the sound of something very heavy slowly rolling across the roof of a house — if the house was a mountain and the *something* was the moon. He looked around. Abeke was watching the hunters at work, Rollan was calling to Essix. Tarik was looking at him questioningly. Clearly no one else heard.

“Hey, guys,” Conor began, “I think you should move away from —”

The groan increased. Still no one seemed to hear. Briggan spooked away with a yip. Conor tried to determine where the sound was coming from.

The ice. Below. There.

“Abeke!” he yelled. He ran forward, grabbing her hand and pulling her away.

“Conor, what are you —”

Abeke was interrupted by a loud CRACK. The ice where she’d been standing was splitting. Everyone was running now, but the lengthening crack was faster, and in a moment, Tarik was gone.

Conor saw the Ardu drop to their bellies, so he did the same, Abeke and Rollan beside him. Essix flew over the hole in the ice, screeching. Nothing disturbed the bright blue water’s surface.

“Tarik!” Rollan yelled, crawling forward. Conor followed him, thinking to hold Rollan’s ankles while he plunged in for Tarik. But then their Greencloak mentor appeared, thrashing and gasping. Something was pushing him up from underneath.

Tarik clawed his way onto the ice. Rollan grabbed his hand and helped pull, and they both scooted away from the crack. Behind them, the helpful seal emerged, sitting upright on the ice.

“Don’t kill that seal! Please!” Conor yelled.

One of the Ardu women let out a quick, rough laugh.

“Of course not,” the hunter said. “She’s my spirit animal.”

Conor stared, his mouth gaping for a moment, but quickly collected himself, hurrying over to help Tarik. Still he couldn’t help but wonder if that was an awkward relationship, given the woman’s diet.

Tarik was lying on the ice, shivering, his lips blue.

“We should go at once,” said the woman.

“But, Tarik . . .” Abeke started.

“He walks,” said the chief. “In this cold, he must keep walking or he dies.”

Tarik nodded. He walked.

All but Tarik took turns dragging the heavy seals back to the Ardu ice village, where others took over, skinning the seals, preparing the meat. The women helped Tarik out of his wet clothes and into pieces of their own dry clothing.

Other Ardu offered snow-packed chairs for the travelers. Some of the villagers brought out animal skin drums, and amid heavy drumming and loud singing, the feast began. Conor's stomach was rumbling, eager, until he saw the feast.

Apparently the Ardu ate their meat raw. A woman handed Conor a pink, wobbly blob with a glistening chunk of brown meat clinging to it. The pink parts were the fat, Conor quickly discovered.

The Ardu sucked up the pink fat first, making slurping noises and humming contentedly. They made the fat sound so delicious, Conor's mouth actually started to water.

He took a bite. It was not delicious. It tasted like cold, oily, chewy fat. But Conor considered that in frozen Arctica, the more fat on the body, the warmer and healthier they would be. He slurped up some of the fat, swallowing it while holding his breath. The brown meat was smooth like raw fish and very salty. Conor felt as if he were taking a bite of solid ocean.

The girls were offered bone cups filled with wiggly white stuff, as if it were a special honor. They ate it before learning that it was seal brains.

"It was creamy," said Maya.

Meilin just shook her head and looked a little green.

Tarik held a small horn cup with a spoonful of the white stuff. He began to bob his head back and forth and sing, "Seal brains, seal brains, take some pains for seal brains. Better for you than your grains. Creamy, steamy seal brains."

Rollan and Conor looked at each other, speechless. Tarik stopped singing, restoring his serious face.

"I didn't just imagine that, did I?" said Rollan. "Tarik, did you just sing a song about seal brains?"

Abeke nodded, her smile broad, showing her startlingly white teeth. "I want

to hear another.”

Tarik looked so serious, Conor was certain he would never admit he’d sung such a song, let alone reprise —

“Seal brains,” Tarik sang, “seal brains, my love for them it never strains. Just avoid the stringy veins in your pile of seal — I can’t do it,” he said, putting down the horn cup. “I cannot convince myself to actually eat seal brains.”

“Now, Tarik,” said Rollan. “You’re spoiling your hardened warrior reputation. Go gnaw on some raw bones, quick!”

Tarik betrayed a small smile. “When I was growing up, if our mother gave us something unpleasant to eat, my brothers and I would make up a song about it to convince ourselves it was delicious. It worked well with lima beans and kale, but no song in Erdas can convince me to snack on brains.”

Abeke took up the cup Tarik had abandoned. “I don’t mind it. In my village we ate every part of any animal we managed to hunt, just like the Ardu.”

As she lifted the spoon to her mouth, her eyes flicked to Rollan. Conor saw him nod a little. Rollan and Abeke seemed to share the experience of having to appreciate every last morsel of food.

Growing up, life hadn’t been a banquet for Conor either, but he’d never starved. Even in the direst of times, there’d always been mutton, acorn and bullrush bread, wild asparagus, and boiled clover and dandelion. But in Abeke’s arid Okaihee, or in Rollan’s cobbled Concorba, there would have been few wild plants to gather or sheep to slay. Conor realized, even in his poverty, he’d been lucky.

But did his family have mutton now? Last he’d heard from home, times were troubled. They’d lost some sheep and weren’t likely to have one spare. He bit into a purple slice of liver and tried to appreciate it on behalf of his family.

The feast went on all evening. Slice after slice of meat and fat, bits of organ meat offered up on bone knives. Then the rest of the seals — chopped up and slowly cooked over pans of burning seal fat — were offered in small bowls. Lastly, the women passed around small, pink rolls, which earned satisfied cheers

from the Ardu. Conor took a bite and realized it was more seal fat, mixed perhaps with flour and something sweet. Conor surprised himself by taking a second.

“Mm, seal-fat sweet cakes,” said Rollan. “Just like Mama used to make.”

Rollan winced at his own joke for some reason and turned away, suddenly despondent. Conor supposed thinking about a mother reminded him that he didn't have one of his own. Conor's own heart pinched, thinking of his mother and what she might be doing right now.

“We thank you for this magnificent feast,” Tarik said, loudly enough to be heard over the drums.

“Especially the seal brains,” Rollan whispered.

Tarik cleared his throat. “We're on an urgent mission for the safety of all of Erdas. We seek Suka —”

At once the drumming stopped. In the silence, Conor became aware of the sharp sound of wind chiseling away at the tundra.

“We do not talk of Suka,” said the Ardu man. “You may sleep here tonight. In the morning, you should go.”

The Ardu showed the group to their ice huts, their mouths shut as if there would be no more conversation. Conor crawled on his hands and knees to get through the narrow opening of the offered ice hut. Once inside, he was surprised how warm and quiet the room was. It wasn't tall enough to stand in, but he sat comfortably on the flat ground, atop a pile of caribou hides. The others joined him, all spirit animals in passive form in the tight space. Except Essix, of course.

“Essix saw another settlement like this one a ways in that direction, and a third that way,” said Rollan, pointing at two corners of their hut.

“Yeah, Briggan seemed to smell people off that way too,” said Conor. “It'd have to be a lot of people to smell that far off, I think.” He didn't mention that *he* thought he'd smelled people when the wind came from that direction as well. Maybe his sense of smell was sharpening, but the others might think that a little creepy.

“Why are they separated like that?” asked Meilin. “Why not all settle together?”

“Maybe they don’t get along,” said Abeke.

“Or maybe they’re posted here like guards — watching over something that’s in the center,” said Meilin.

“The Ice City maybe?” said Conor.

“Isn’t this the Ice City?” Maya asked.

“I doubt it,” said Tarik. “It’s small and looks recently built. Hopefully in the morning, after the feasting, the Ardu will be content and disposed to tell us what they know of the legendary Ice City. But no one mention Suka again.”

Conor and Rollan both yawned at the same time, and then laughed.

“Let’s get some sleep,” said Tarik.



ICE CITY

ABEKE DIDN'T SLEEP. She could picture the Ardu village, and the location of the other two settlements Essix had spotted. The three settlements formed a triangle. Briggan had smelled a lot of people. And Abeke smelled something fishy.

The positions of the settlements reminded Abeke of how her villagers had hunted a hippopotamus once. The drought was high, and food was rare. Three groups of hunters surrounded a water hole where hippos came to drink. They moved in slowly till the hippo had nowhere to run.

The Ardu were hunters too, and they'd surrounded something they didn't want anyone else to know about. When Tarik had asked about Suka, the singing and drumming and smiles had stopped. Clearly, Suka was something they didn't want anyone to know about.

Abeke glanced at the sleeping forms in the hut. She didn't want to wake anyone. Besides, it would feel really great to be a hero for once, to run back to camp and let everyone know she'd found Suka!

She was still wearing her coat and gloves. She picked up her bow and quiver and crept out the door.

Once outside, she released Uraza.

“I know it’s cold,” Abeke whispered. “But I need your added stealth. Help me find Suka?”

Uraza shivered, whisking her tail back and forth several times. Abeke led her to a small pile of seal meat she’d saved in the snow. Uraza grabbed it with her sharp teeth, and in three quick movements swallowed it all. She licked Abeke, sniffed the air, and padded out of the village.

A light snow was falling over Arctica; flakes as tiny as pinpricks twirled out of the way of Abeke’s breath. With Uraza active, her whole body felt tight, agile, light as snow. When her boot stepped on the thin, fresh layer on the ice, the snow made no sound.

Even if it had, the Ardu had seemed especially drowsy after all that feasting. She suspected they’d sleep well tonight.

As soon as the ice huts were behind them, Uraza and Abeke ran. Through the clouds, the moon offered a dim blue glow. Abeke kept her gaze sharp, but Uraza noticed something before she did. The leopard slowed to a loping gait. Abeke followed.

An ice hole — but not like the breath holes they’d found earlier. There was no water beneath the ice here. This hole seemed deep and empty. As she crouched beside it, Abeke could see what looked like stairs cut into the ice, going down.

Abeke held her breath to listen and realized someone had followed her. She could hear the occasional crack of ice behind her, the hush as the soft layer of snow atop the ice was pressed by a small boot. Uraza sniffed the air, but didn’t seem bothered. Someone Abeke knew, then. But if it was one of the group, why follow her in secret? Why not simply catch up and ask what she was doing?

Abeke’s stomach hardened as she realized the answer — it was someone who didn’t trust her, who wanted to spy on her. Someone who suspected her of being the enemy.

Abeke wondered what to do. Hide, and then jump out? No, she didn’t want

any unpleasant confrontation. She just wanted to find Suka's talisman, so they could all get out of this freezing-cold nightmare. Uraza pressed against her leg, her shivering body a silent plea.

So Abeke stood and turned around, whispering into the dark, "Meilin, is that you?"

There was no response, but after a few moments Meilin came forward out of the blue darkness. Usually Meilin stood with chin high, eyes challenging. Now her face tilted down and she didn't meet Abeke's eyes. Abeke pretended not to notice her embarrassment.

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered. "I suspected something was down here — hopefully Suka. Shall we look together?"

Abeke started down the steps. She tensed, waiting for Meilin to confront her, accuse her. When Meilin just wordlessly followed behind, Abeke finally exhaled.

The stairs kept going down. Above was darkness. Below was darkness. But she followed Uraza, who seemed confident that there was a way forward, not just a drop into nothing. The heels of Abeke's boots couldn't find purchase. She stepped lightly on her toes, her thighs aching as her feet tried to grip the treacherous ice. And then with a slip and a swoosh she was horizontal, her feet flying out from beneath her. She hit the icy stairs and began to roll, striking down against one after another, darkness pulling her down, no sense of how long she would fall, no idea where she would land.

She slammed into a warm, furry body. She seized Uraza around her neck and heard the leopard's claws squeaking as she dug into the ice. But Abeke's fall stopped. She kept gripping Uraza's thick fur, steadying herself as she got back on her feet and still clung as they eased down the remainder of the stairs into a pale-lit corridor.

"Meilin," Abeke whispered up the dark stairs. "Be careful, I —"

Meilin came into view, sliding down the icy stairs on her backside. Her chin was up as if daring Abeke to mock her.

Abeke let the corner of her mouth rise a little. Meilin's smile twitched in response.

They tiptoed through a narrow ice tunnel. It opened up, and both Abeke and Meilin gasped.

A long and narrow fissure had once cracked the ice, creating a huge underground canyon so long Abeke couldn't see its end. A thin layer of ice created a roof over it, like the kind that had concealed the crevasses of the tundra. The moon bled pale light through it, lightly illuminating the space with blue and silver.

"The Ice City," Meilin whispered. "It's *underground*."

Abeke nodded. She didn't dare make a sound. Though she couldn't see anyone, Uraza was sniffing the air in the way she did when sensing people. A lot of people.

First Abeke noticed that it felt warmer down here, though perhaps that was just protection from the cold Arctican breezes. Second she realized how quiet it was. All that ice muffled noises. Her own heartbeat seemed loud compared to the stillness around her filling her ears, insistent as the Ardu drums. Only the occasional crinkling and cracking of ice stirred the air, as ice never seemed completely at rest.

She left the tunnel and entered the Ice City.

The rift was much larger than the crevasses Meilin and Rollan had fallen into on their journey. This rift had cut a long, deep section of solid ice in two. Carved into each side of the ice walls was a city. Abeke walked down the narrow sidewalk of one side of the rift. Like apartments in a city tenement, room after room had been cut into the cliff. There were no straight edges. Everything was in arches and curves. Doorways were draped with hides. Abeke peered through a thinner layer of clear ice that served as a window. The inside of the room looked like a small home, with a table and chairs carved from ice and a great chunk for an ice bed. It was empty. Many were empty, but in some homes, people slept on the beds, wrapped with caribou hides.

“How is it glowing?” Meilin whispered.

Abeke shrugged. It should be dark down below, but a twilight silver graced every surface. Somehow the builders must have known how to best carve the ice so that it soaked up and reflected the little moon- and starlight that trickled down.

Every piece of ice was carved — the ground bore the carvings of fine cobblestones, the great icicles hanging down were etched with intricate patterns. The front walls of the homes bore faces of women and children, of great warriors and hunters, of Arctican animals. The walls were frozen tapestries, the blocks of ice magnificent sculptures. Hundreds of years of carving showed everywhere Abeke looked.

Ice bridges spanned the crevasse. Abeke and Meilin crossed over, the arched bridge creaking quietly beneath their boots. In the opposite side they found more houses and structures carved into the ice walls and frozen art in abundance. What’s more, they found stairs leading down.

Deeper seemed safer, and surely that’s where Suka would be. So they descended and discovered another story of the Ice City, more houses and structures and art. More stairs and yet another story, and another, so that it seemed there would be no end.

Deeper they descended. The air seemed warmer still, though Abeke wondered if she was imagining it. Then the ice ended. And instead of ice, the rest of the city was carved from rock. No ice tapestries here, no sculptures, just walkways and stairs cut out of dark brown stone. They were so deep, Abeke wondered if they were in the center of the world. She felt pressure swelling inside her ears.

Deeper into the rock city, the air was definitely warmer. Uraza panted happily. Abeke glanced at Meilin to see if she would release Jhi now that she wouldn’t suffer from the cold. Meilin lifted one eyebrow, perhaps guessing her thoughts. Jhi remained a mark on Meilin’s arm.

Abeke and Meilin took off their coats and gloves, carrying the huge bundles

under their arms. Torches lit the darker space, oil-soaked fur on bones crackling with fire. Finally they reached the bottom. They found pools of water, warm air stirring above it, and Abeke imagined how heavenly it would feel to bathe in such water. Surely the inhabitants of the Ice City used this lower level to wash, to drink and cook and thaw out from the harsh Arctican climate. If she had bonded with a snow leopard instead of Uraza, she could imagine finding this place a paradise.

“Suka is supposed to be frozen in ice,” Meilin whispered.

Abeke nodded agreement. They wouldn’t find Suka down here. She pointed back up.

So they climbed stairs till Abeke’s legs shook, and she wondered if before Uraza she would have had the strength to climb all night long. But even without whatever aid Jhi offered her, Meilin didn’t slow. She’d always been tough, but since her father’s death, Meilin seemed to be pure, quivering energy.

At the first ice story, they took to the walkways and continued forward, the long narrow rift extending for perhaps a mile. Uraza’s ears pricked up and she stopped suddenly, Abeke and Meilin halting behind her. Abeke could hear it — people. A mutter, a rustle. A few sleeping people turning over in their sleep. But they’d passed hundreds of apartments. Every Ardu living in icy Arctica had a spirit animal. If Meilin and Abeke were discovered, if the city woke and attacked the intruders, Abeke didn’t think they’d have a chance.

But the noise quieted, and Uraza continued on.

At last they reached the end of the rift and were faced with the facade of an enormous ice building.

“A palace,” Meilin whispered.

“*The Ice Palace*,” said Abeke.

The exterior of the palace was thick, the ice a deep greenish white, except for the windows, which were layered with thin, transparent glasslike ice. The structure rose many stories high, supported by thick ice pillars carved with twining, frosty vines, topped with a triangular roof in a brilliant pure white.

There was no door in the doorway. They entered.

A great hall greeted them, tiles carved in the floor, delicate pillars holding the roof, a grand staircase with a huge chandelier of ice hanging above it all. Abeke knew she would never have time to explore each room, examine all the carved artwork in the walls, the details in each pillar and frozen furniture. No time to explore, because they had already found what they'd sought.

In the center of the great hall waited the polar bear.



10

FROZEN

SUKA DID NOT MOVE. DID NOT BLINK. DID NOT ROAR. WITH held breath and Spounding heart, it took Meilin several seconds to realize the bear was sealed inside a perfectly clear block of ice.

She walked around the huge block. It was the size of a barn. She focused on the ice itself, its marvelous clear color, how smooth its surface was, as if it'd been polished by water. Fear nudged her heart, and she admitted to herself that she was avoiding looking fully at the polar bear.

I am my father's daughter, she thought. I do not fear.

Though thick, the ice was as clear as glass. She steadied her breathing and examined one bear paw, the strands of white fur caught as if in a breeze, the five curved black claws, each longer than Meilin's entire hand. Meilin braced herself and looked up.

Suka had been upright when frozen, standing on her back legs, her front legs lifted, in welcome or defiance Meilin couldn't tell. She bent her neck back, trying to see Suka's head.

"Up here," Abeke whispered.

Abeke was standing at the top of the stairway. Meilin followed, counting the stairs as she climbed: thirty-five. On the landing of the second story, they stood right at eye level with Suka. She seemed to be staring at them, her black eyes open, though so still. Her mouth was slightly gaping, and Meilin could see her long, yellow teeth.

Meilin calculated that five people standing on each other's shoulders would be about the same height as Suka. Though not as wide. Or heavy. Or as clawed or toothy or deadly.

Was it wise to wake such a beast?

"Look," Abeke whispered, her voice full of awe.

Meilin saw. Tied with a cord to Suka's left paw was a blue crystal carved in the shape of a polar bear.

"Her talisman," Meilin whispered.

Perhaps they wouldn't have to wake Suka. If they could just break through the ice and reach the talisman . . .

"We need Maya," said Meilin.

Abeke glanced around, peeking in a few rooms. "There doesn't seem to be an exit through the Ice Palace."

"We'll have to go back the way we came, through the city," said Meilin.

Abeke nodded. "I can wait here, guard Suka, while you get the others."

Meilin's skin was already covered in goose bumps from the cold and the frightening thrill of encountering this Great Beast. But at Abeke's words, the hairs on her arms stood up even higher. She looked at Abeke, trying to gauge her expression, read her eyes for any thoughts of treachery.

"Maybe I should stay instead . . ." Meilin started.

Abeke sighed. "Meilin, I've tried everything I know. I left home, I left the Conquerors, I joined the Greencloaks. I've slept beside you and fought beside you. What else can I do to earn your trust?"

Meilin felt anger bubble inside her. The sight of Abeke's face, innocent eyes, half concealed by darkness, made her fists curl. Abeke whose family was safe

and alive in Nilo. Abeke who had hugged Shane, Abeke who might be conspiring with the enemy. Someone had to be responsible for what happened to her father — someone who Meilin could strike, make bleed, make pay. But she didn't need Jhi here calming her thoughts and helping her focus her mind to realize that someone wasn't Abeke.

“You stand watch,” said Meilin. “I'll go.”

Meilin ran all the way back through the sleeping city and up the narrow stairway. She emerged into a stiff Arctican breeze, the noise startling after the near silence of the underground. Pulling her hood back up, she ran to the village, thinking how Abeke would be better at this. Stealthier. Less likely to arouse the Ardu.

Why had she wanted Meilin to do it?

Could Abeke have a way of melting or cutting through that ice?

Meilin stopped in the center of a snowy field and looked back. The camp was far closer now than the Ice City. She continued on, though her heartbeats stung and her mouth went dry with fear.

“Hurry,” she whispered to Tarik, Conor, Maya, and Rollan. “Put on your gear. Quiet. We found Suka.”

The four didn't ask a question. They just started putting on boots and coats. In moments they were off again into the snow.

Meilin glanced back. Tarik's otter, Lumeo, was in his active state, a small, pointed head peering out of the neck of Tarik's coat. Maya's salamander was no doubt keeping warm and out of sight as well. Briggan ran beside Conor, occasionally biting at the wind. Essix was nowhere to be seen.

And the entrance to the Ice City felt miles away. Meilin's heart beat harder.

Had she made a mistake? Doubt seared through her. Perhaps Abeke had tricked her, played on her emotions to get Meilin to leave her alone. When she returned, the Crystal Polar Bear would be gone. Abeke would be gone. Meilin would be less trustworthy than Conor, who gave a talisman over to the Conquerors. And she would be that much further from avenging her father.

Meilin ran in front, and when she began to descend down the hidden steps, she heard someone gasp in surprise.

The gasps continued when they emerged from the narrow tunnel into the city itself.

“The song,” Conor whispered. “The city artists made. The carved city. This is it.”

Meilin put her finger to her lips and pointed at the nearest window, indicating that they weren’t alone. Rollan’s eyes widened, and Tarik peered through briefly, but they all resisted slowing to marvel at the city, following Meilin as quickly as they dared. The ice walkways had been carefully scored with cobblestone shapes, which minimized slipping. But it was still ice underfoot, and the ravine just to the side of the walkway led so far down that only darkness stared back up.

They hurried on in quick, careful steps. What would happen if the city dwellers awoke and found them trespassing?

What would happen if Abeke — and the talisman — were gone?

More gasps behind her when Meilin led them to the Ice Palace and to the pedestal of Suka. Meilin’s middle felt as frozen as the city as she walked around the other side. No hole in the ice. The Crystal Polar Bear still tied to Suka’s frozen paw. Abeke stood on the stairs.

Abeke smiled at Meilin, and Meilin exhaled and smiled back.

“There,” Abeke said, pointing to the left paw. “Maya, can you extract that?”

Conor and Rollan were just standing there, staring up at the huge beast, their mouths open. Meilin rolled her eyes, but suspected she’d worn a similar expression when she first laid eyes on the monstrosity.

Tarik was running his hands over the ice, walking around the block as if measuring.

“We could never hack through this, not without —”

“Waking the whole city,” Abeke finished.

“Yes, I don’t think the Ardu hospitality would survive if they discovered us trying to cut into Suka’s icy prison,” said Tarik.

The four teammates looked around, catching one another's eyes. Meilin felt that they were all thinking, as she was, of past cities, past communities like Samis, who just wanted to keep things as they were. But Erdas had already changed and nothing could stay as it always had been — not in Zhong, not in Trunswick, not even in the wilds of Amaya, not anywhere for long. The Devourer's reach was long. Meilin was sorry to trespass on the Ardu, but she knew — like Conor, Rollan, and Abeke seemed to know — that no one was safe unless the Devourer was stopped. She believed in their mission. Collect power. Protect the talismans. Prepare to fight.

“Here?” asked Maya, pointing to the Crystal Polar Bear.

Tarik nodded. “As much as I'd like to meet Suka, I am hesitant to expose any of you to a beast that size.”

“Look at those claws,” Rollan whispered. “They're as long as butter knives. Sharp butter knives. No, *meat* knives.”

“If we can free the talisman without waking Suka —” Tarik began.

“Come look at her teeth!” Conor called from atop the stairs.

“Okay, everyone, here it goes,” said Maya.

She'd climbed halfway up the stairs and removed her caribou-fur glove from her right hand. A fist-sized ball of light formed over her palm. As Meilin watched, the pale yellow light spun, shades of orange and red streaking and pulsing together. Maya took a deep breath and blew. A thin stream of fire shot out, burrowing into the solid ice. A rivulet streamed down, forming a pool on the icy floor. A narrow hole about two finger lengths deep was scored into the ice, pointing at the talisman.

“Well, about twenty more of those should do it!” Maya said brightly.

She held up her palm and started again.

While she worked, Conor and Rollan walked around the barn-sized block, gawking at Suka.

“I dare you to touch it,” Rollan whispered.

“You first,” Conor whispered back.

“I’ll carry your pack for three days if you lick it.”

Conor actually seemed to consider.

“Boys,” Meilin muttered.

Scattered around the ground at the base of the huge block lay knitted clothes, intricately carved walrus tusks, necklaces of ivory beads. Gifts the Ardu had laid at Suka’s feet.

Meilin walked along the upper story, searching for a possible exit up to the ground. The Ice Palace was full of rooms — ballrooms, drawing rooms, bedrooms — all hollowed out of the solid ice and full of carved furniture. She imagined that, long ago, Suka somehow flooded this area with water — perhaps carving a channel from the ocean — and then submerging herself, allowing herself to freeze deep underground.

Perhaps the Ardu found frozen Suka years later when exploring the great rift and began to carve out a palace around her, and beyond that, a city. Year after year, sculpting and carving, turning every inch into a work of art. How must it be to live near a thing so awesome and fearsome as this Great Beast?

Meilin found no stairway up to the tundra, but she was just about to explore a room full of statues — animals of Arctica carved in huge columns of ice — when she heard Tarik shout.

“Wait!”

Meilin started at the noise. Till now, everyone had been so quiet. She hurried back to the landing.

Maya was standing with a ball of flame over her palm. She shook her hand, the fire dissolving into the air, and looked at Tarik with frightened eyes.

“Wait,” Tarik said, whispering now. “It’s cracking.”

Around the hole, tiny splinters had formed with each enlargement; thin white lines radiated out from the hole Maya had burned into the thick ice. But now Meilin noticed two larger cracks moving away from the hole. Slowly. But moving. Spreading. Reminding Meilin of the time she’d pressed her thumb

alongside a crack in a windowpane and made it grow longer. Maya had stepped back, as if waiting for the cracks to stop. But they didn't.

They kept growing. As if something was pressing — from the inside.

Everyone was still, breaths held, watching. Meilin was on the second level. She was at just the right spot to look into Suka's eyes. So she saw the moment that Suka looked back.

Meilin gasped and took a step away.

“She's —” Meilin started.

“Don't —” Tarik said.

Maya dropped her hands and backed up the stairs. Only Rollan moved forward.

“Suka,” he whispered.

The shudder came first. Then ice cracking, the sound as high and piercing as the shriek of a kestrel. Then the eruption. The entire ice block shattered, shards and chunks exploding out. Everyone ran, ducked, covered their heads with their hands.

The gigantic polar bear lifted her paws and roared.



SUKA

ROLLAN TRIED VERY HARD NOT TO SOIL HIS PANTS.

He knew Suka was large. But frozen in ice, she'd seemed tame somehow.

Awake, in motion, she was scarier than street thugs looking for a fight, than a Great Ram thrashing, than an army of Conquerors.

Suka seemed to be death itself.

There was no intelligence in her eyes, only the wildness of a predator trapped. She lurched, cracking the rest of the ice block into pieces.

She roared. The people in the Ice City woke. And they screamed.

“Suka, wait!” Rollan started.

Suka staggered again, slamming into a pillar. The Ice Palace began to come down.

“Get out!” Tarik yelled. “Everybody get to the surface!”

The Great Beast roared, lashing out with her monstrous paws. Pillars fell, the ceiling cracked, chunks of ice began falling. The smallest of them could crush Rollan into oblivion. They had to get out of the Ice Palace now — but he also knew if they tried to flee the way they'd come, Suka might follow, and tear apart

the Ice City in the process. All those people would be crushed or fall down the rift. No, there had to be another exit.

Up. Through a hole Suka had smashed in the ceiling, Rollan saw stars. Fallen ice created a heap he might be able to climb to reach the hole in the ceiling. Tarik saw it too.

“Go up!” Tarik yelled.

A huge piece of pillar fell right toward Tarik. At the last moment, he ducked and twisted in a motion that seemed impossible to Rollan’s eye, barely escaping the falling ice.

Meilin and Abeke had been on the landing and were already climbing the icy rubble toward the hole in the ceiling. Beside Uraza, Abeke leaped from block to block with astounding ease. Meilin must have had the Granite Ram, because she jumped in great arches, passing even Abeke. Once up and out of the underground palace, she stooped over the hole and dropped the Granite Ram down to Maya, who caught it and began to leap up too.

Conor was trapped, Suka between him and the way leading up and out. Rollan hoped Suka might recognize Briggan as a fellow Great Beast, but her eyes were all wild animal rage. She swiped at Conor, and he ducked and ran, as fast as Briggan, as fast as a windblown leaf. His head low, he barely made it beneath the striking paw and beyond, and began to run up the fallen ice.

Everyone was on their way out of the Ice Palace but Rollan. He’d been on the far side opposite Conor and was crawling over fallen ice, trying not to draw the bear’s notice. Now there was no one left to notice but him.

Suka turned, sniffed, and growled.

“Essix!” Rollan yelled. “Essix, please!”

He did not know what help she could provide. He didn’t even know where she was.

Suka’s paw came down. And the ice floor around Rollan began to crack.

Tarik paused, halfway up the rubble, and pulled Dinesh’s Slate Elephant from the pack around his neck. He lifted it high, as if he would throw it to Rollan, but

Rollan could see he was too far away. His otter-enhanced abilities didn't include a perfect throwing arm.

One more strike from Suka would end everything for Rollan. Either she would hit him this time, crushing him to bits, or she'd completely crack the ice around him and send him tumbling down.

"Essix!" he called again.

A falcon screeched.

Essix swooped through the hole in the ceiling and down into the crumbling Ice Palace. She took the Slate Elephant from Tarik, seizing the gold chain in her talons. The gray stone elephant dangled as she flew, looking heavy beside her petite body. She screeched again, and Suka looked away from Rollan to the falcon, swatting at the air. Essix dove, deftly avoiding her strikes, and flew right over Rollan. She released the Slate Elephant, and he caught it.

The ground beneath him shuddered, and a crack widened, claiming one of his legs. He tore open the neck of his coat and pushed the talisman in, making contact with his skin.

A flash and Essix was as large as a flying wolf, with a wingspan as long as several grown men are tall.

Her shriek was so loud now, it cracked ice. Suka put her paws to her ears and roared.

Essix swooped, and Rollan lifted his hands. The ice shuddered again. He started to fall, his stomach full of butterflies. But he only fell a moment before he lifted again. Essix had snatched his coat at the wrists with her talons and pulled him up, her huge wings thrashing.

Suka swatted, just nicking one of Essix's wings. She dipped to one side but caught the air again and rose, barely fitting through the hole in the ceiling. They flew up into the startlingly cold air, all wind and snow, the hint of dawn bleeding yellow into the blue night.

"Yes! Thank you, Essix!" Rollan yelled.

Essix shrieked.

“Ow — but not so loud.”

He was out of that underground nightmare, but he wasn't safe. None of them were. From below, more growls and crashes. Suka was tearing the palace apart. Cracks in the ice grew larger as the ground began to cave in. Tarik, Maya, and Conor had been standing nearest the hole, and now they ran away from it even as its cracks grew larger, seemingly reaching out for them. The Arctican tundra lay flat around them for miles, nowhere to hide. Suka would fight her way out of the collapsing palace. She would be free to pursue them and would be faster than any could run.

“Rollan, give me or Conor the elephant,” Abeke shouted from the other side of the hole. “Only Uraza or Briggan have a hope of fighting her.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rollan shouted back from the air. “No one has a hope of fighting her!”

Just then Suka rose up from the collapsing ground. At first only her upper body, but with one push and leap, the huge creature was free, galloping on four paws up the ice, straight toward Rollan.

Essix lifted again, and Suka rose on her back legs, reaching, swiping the air. Higher Essix flew, but Rollan wondered if it would be high enough. Suka's arm seemed to reach as far as the moon, her claws inches away from his dangling feet.

Essix's huge wings kept beating, and she and Rollan rose higher still, leaving Suka to land back on the ice. She swung her head around.

“Find Meilin!” Rollan called to Essix. “We need Jhi. A big Jhi, a Jhi Suka can't ignore.”

Rollan couldn't see Meilin anywhere, but Abeke must have had the Granite Ram now. She was leaping in a huge arc over a crack, much farther than she'd ever be capable of, even with Uraza enhancing her powers.

Rollan's arms ached as he dangled from Essix by his wrists. And then suddenly, he was falling. Essix had let go. He started to scream —

Essix's talons seized him again, this time by the coat on his shoulders. She'd

only let go to readjust. The position was far more comfortable.

“Thanks, Essix,” Rollan said, his voice shivery with nerves. “Glad you still want me to hang around.”

Suka was roaring. She lifted a paw to swat Maya. Maya tore her glove off her hand, produced a ball of fire, and blew. A wall of thin fire rushed out from Maya, blocking Suka. The polar bear reared back, her paw flung over her eyes. The fire dissipated quickly in the freezing air. There was nothing to burn, no wood or grasses to set aflame and create a barricade to hide behind. Suka readjusted to attack again. Maya responded with another wall of fire. But this time, Suka raked the ground with her claws, sending boulders of ice crashing through the fire. One struck Maya’s leg. She screamed in pain and fell. Tarik picked her up and ran away from the polar bear.

Suka blinked and reared her head, looking for a new target. Conor was alone, running from the lengthening cracks in the ground. Suka moved toward him.

“Abeke!” Rollan yelled. “Jump to Conor! Get him out of there!”

Abeke crouched to jump but paused. The hole between her and Conor was even greater now. She couldn’t get to him in time.

“Drop me, Essix,” Rollan said, hoping to free Essix to go save Conor.

Essix started downward, but Conor was already sliding toward the hole, and Suka was getting closer. Essix kept hold of Rollan, surely realizing, as Rollan did, that she couldn’t reach Conor in time.

Abeke took out an arrow, tied the talisman to it, and aimed high, perhaps adjusting for the extra weight. She shot the arrow.

The arrow struck the ice beside Conor’s head. He broke it off, grabbing the talisman just as the ground fell beneath him. Conor jumped.

His first leap carried him halfway across the crumbling crevasse, but not far enough. A huge chunk of ice fell below him. He slammed his foot down, pushing against the falling ice for a little more lift, and he leaped again, his arms circling as the ice cliff came closer. He almost made it, one hand reaching out to grab the edge. Abeke was there, grabbing his wrist and pulling him up.

Suka crouched on three of her paws, her fourth held to her chest, protecting the talisman. She began to run around the huge hole toward Abeke and Conor.

Abeke let arrows fly. The bear swatted them out of the air. A few stuck in her thick coat, not even reaching the skin. She shook, the arrows falling with delicate tinkles onto the ice. Suka roared and slammed her paws down. Another crack formed in the ice, traveling at terrifying speed toward Abeke. Conor grabbed her hand and leaped just as the ice beneath their feet ripped apart, ice chunks tumbling down into a new rift.

“Suka, stop!” Rollan yelled. “Please! Essix, tell her to stop!”

He spotted dozens of shapes huddled at the far end of the huge rift. And then he looked closer and found that he could see even clearer.

“Thanks, Essix,” he muttered.

Rollan could make out people emerging from the hidden stairs at the far end of the great rift, where Rollan had first followed Meilin into the underground city. They were huddled in blankets, having fled the Ice City too fast to dress. Some were barefoot. He also spotted lots of animals — snow foxes, owls, seagulls, caribou, seals — their spirit animals, all likely giving them a hardened ability to withstand the cold. They stood and watched, but they did not come to help. They would not fight Suka. Clearly they were brighter than Rollan’s crew.

And running toward the Ardu, he spotted Meilin.

“Essix, there!” Rollan said, pointing.

The falcon flew Rollan with a swoop so low and so fast that Rollan’s stomach seemed left far behind. His breath tingled with speed and icy air.

Essix passed before Meilin, dropping Rollan. He landed on the ice feetfirst, but tipped and rolled before regaining his feet.

“We need to gather the people from the Ice City,” said Meilin. Rollan ran alongside her to keep up. “They have spirit animals, they can fight —”

“They won’t fight Suka,” said Rollan. “They built a palace for her. We need Jhi!”

“What?” Meilin stopped. “Jhi can’t fight Suka.”

“Of course not, no one could, not an entire army,” said Rollan. “But maybe Jhi can communicate with her, calm her.”

“Jhi’s a *panda!*” Meilin yelled.

“A panda *bear!* Come on, you have to try!” Rollan yelled back.

He pulled the Slate Elephant from against his chest, and above him, circling Essix returned to her normal size with a muted screech.

Meilin’s eyes were hot, and she seemed about to argue, but they could hear another Suka roar, and shouts from Abeke and Conor.

“Fine!” said Meilin.

She tore open the neck of her coat and slid the elephant against her skin, held in place by her many layers of clothing. Then she pushed up the sleeve of her coat. A flash of brightness, a leaping shape, and then Jhi stood before them. Except Jhi was no longer normal panda-sized. She was perhaps almost as large as the Great Beast had been in her prime. She was gigantic — maybe half the size of Suka.

Jhi looked at Meilin, huffed at a snowflake, and shivered. Suka roared, and Jhi slowly turned her head in that direction. She seemed to consider, then looked again at Meilin.

“Suka is awake and enraged,” Meilin said softly. “She isn’t talking, just trying to . . . to kill us. If there’s anything you can do . . .”

Jhi looked toward Suka again. Two giant bears. One much larger, her clawed paws the size of boulders, her toothy maw like a gaping cave. The other bear smaller, slower, paws for climbing trees, teeth for gently nibbling bamboo, her shoulders shivering in the Arctican wind.

Jhi huffed air through her nose, then began ambling toward the commotion.

Meilin grabbed the arm of Rollan’s coat. “She doesn’t know how to fight. She’s going to get killed. I don’t want —” Her voice broke, and she took a shaky breath. “I don’t want her to get killed. I don’t want anyone else to die.”

Rollan nodded. He reached out, took her gloved hand in his.

“We have to try,” he whispered.

Meilin took another shaky breath, looked at him briefly, and her face softened.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. And he tried a small smile to show that it *would* be okay.

As one, they ran after Jhi, toward Suka and shouts and the impossible fight. They ran in lockstep, side by side the whole way, her hand in his.

POLAR BEAR ATTACK

MEILIN RAN. SHE WAS CONSCIOUS OF ROLLAN HOLDING HER hand, but the thick layers of their caribou-hide gloves made the touch feel safe, casual. A comfort. He wasn't trying to hold her, she wasn't trying to pull him. They were just doing the same thing at the same time, running toward danger together.

She was grateful for his closeness, because ahead of her, some eight hundred pounds of enlarged panda were padding toward the most frightening monster Meilin had ever beheld. Meilin wasn't used to this feeling, iciness dripping from her heart into her stomach, her legs weak and shaking. She wasn't used to intense, senseless fear.

My father's death weakened me, she thought vaguely.

Before her seemingly immortal father's end, death had never seemed truly real. Now it was. Now anyone might die. Meilin herself, Rollan, Tarik. Even Jhi. Jhi had died before — she might be killed again. A quiver in Meilin's heart warned her that she couldn't stand it.

Jhi was almost to Suka. The polar bear was standing on her back legs. She lifted her head to the whitening sky and roared. Meilin felt the roar inside her chest, Suka's confusion and pain vibrating with her own. Her arms felt heavy, as

if she were back in Zhong holding her father's body, weighed down with heat and rage. In that moment, without Jhi and her friends to stop her, she would have done anything, hurt anybody.

"Jhi, be careful!" Meilin shouted. "Suka's not in her right mind!"

Suka slammed back down, her right front paw cracking the ice, her left pressed to her chest, again hiding the talisman. She opened her mouth, exposing teeth as long as Meilin's leg.

Jhi didn't stop, stepping around the larger chunks of ice comfortably, slowly and deliberately advancing. She was so large, her black markings were clear against the white background. Suka seemed mesmerized. She growled at the Great Panda. Jhi stood at Suka's flank and stretched her neck toward Suka as if to touch noses.

Suka leaned back, raising a paw. Meilin held her breath. With one swat, that clawed paw could end Jhi. But Jhi didn't duck, didn't retreat. She just looked calmly into the black eyes of certain death.

Jhi is brave, Meilin realized. Fearless.

Jhi stood on her hind legs too. Suka hesitated, clearly entranced by the sight of that huge panda — the movement of her dark limbs against a world of white, her silver eyes catching the dawning sun. She stretched her neck out from her hunched shoulders. Suka was breathing hard, almost as if she were afraid. But she let Jhi's nose touch hers.

Meilin could see the huffing of Suka's chest slow. Her paw lowered without striking. Jhi put one black paw against Suka's heart.

Suka dropped to all fours, Jhi beside her. They touched necks. Meilin wondered if through all that thick fur, their touch felt much like holding Rollan's gloved hand. She realized she was still holding his hand and dropped it, suddenly embarrassed.

But she didn't take her eyes from the bears. They were leaning into each other, Suka's eyes closed. Meilin had felt that peace Jhi radiated, at times

intensely. Often she had rejected it, preferring to be angry. She held her breath, waiting for Suka to reject it too and attack again.

But when Suka opened her huge eyes, they'd lost their wildness. She looked at Jhi, at the Crystal Polar Bear still strapped to her left paw, then around at the various people — crouched, tense, ready to flee — all watching her.

“Jhi,” Suka said. Her voice reminded Meilin of growls, of winds, of ice thousands of years old just starting to crack. It was a wild sound, deep enough to shake her bones, as lonely as an ice mountain in the middle of a tundra, as careful as a snowflake falling.

“Oh, Jhi,” said Suka, “what has happened to Erdas?”

Jhi sat back on her hind legs and blinked. Suka nuzzled her neck, inhaling, then she sat back as well.

“You have returned,” she said. “But you are not as you were.”

Jhi turned her large head to look at Meilin. Sensing a request, Meilin pulled the Slate Elephant from beneath her coat, showing Suka. Jhi flickered in place and returned to her normal size, almost as if her gigantic proportions had just been a trick of the light.

“Ah, Dinesh,” said Suka. “I see.” She rubbed her eyes with one paw, as if seeing caused her pain.

Rollan approached. Meilin refused to be less courageous than he was and hurried up, walking beside him. She stopped next to Jhi, putting her hand into the fur of the panda's neck. She could feel her shivering, but sensed she wouldn't want to go into passive state yet.

“How long was I asleep?” Suka asked.

“Long enough for the Ardu to find you and carve an ice palace around you,” Meilin said.

“And an entire ice city beyond that,” Rollan added.

Suka looked to where the Ardu from the Ice City stood, far on the other side of the great rift. “The Ardu have always been my people. I hope I didn't hurt them. I . . . feel strange, after all that time asleep. My mind, it seems, took longer

to wake up.” She looked at Jhi. “Perhaps it never would have. But you were always the healer. When a healer joins a war, all should take notice. I should have taken notice.”

Suka’s eyes grew distant, as if she could see something miles away, beyond the view of anyone else. She breathed deeply. “Erdas is not what it was. I do not believe even you can heal her.”

Jhi blinked.

Meilin looked for Tarik and Maya, but she couldn’t see them. Perhaps Tarik had carried Maya too far away to see that Suka had been subdued.

“Suka, as you can see, the Four Fallen have returned,” Meilin said.

Conor and Abeke had been edging closer, Briggan and Uraza beside them. Essix settled onto Rollan’s shoulder.

Suka growled, and Meilin flinched, expecting another attack. But after a moment, she realized it was a laugh.

“Their falling was partly what drove me into the ice all those years ago,” said Suka. “At my age, I should be wise, but I can only see my own folly.”

“You hid yourself because you were afraid?” Meilin asked.

Suka’s head turned to her, mouth slightly open, her long yellow teeth showing, and Meilin flinched. What in all Erdas could such a beast fear? Even calm, Suka was not safe.

Perhaps Rollan felt her shudder because he leaned closer to whisper, “Next time I’d like to meet a nice, cuddly Great Beast. Perhaps a giant bunny.”

“I was afraid, in a way,” Suka was saying. “The death of the Four reminded all of us that not even Great Beasts are completely immortal. I’d hoped by freezing myself, I might prolong my own life. But more, I hoped to keep —” She lifted her paw to look at the talisman and then pressed it back against her middle. “I’d hoped to keep my talisman out of evil hands.”

She adjusted herself, and Jhi went closer, sitting beside her huge leg. She looked up, and Meilin noticed Suka’s breath, white against the air, slowly exhaling. Jhi’s presence was comforting her, encouraging her to go on.

“I should have fought beside you, Jhi,” Suka said, her voice low and frightening. “And with you, Briggan, Uraza, Essix. What power I could have brought to you!” She slammed her paw on the ice, making cracks. “Regret drove me into the ice too. We Great Beasts have a stewardship over Erdas but a love of our own lives. The prideful belief that we’d always be greater than any man-driven rabble blinded us. Blinded *me*. You know, before I froze myself, Halawir the Eagle came to me, asking to *borrow* my talisman! I sent him on his way — minus a few tail feathers.”

Suka laughed, the sound like an avalanche. But quickly her eyes saddened.

“But I had to ask myself, what did Halawir want with my talisman? I imagined what would happen if another Devourer arose and renewed the war, but this time holding all the talismans of power. I grew warier and warier. Better to remove myself from the world, preserve my life, and keep my talisman away from the Devourer and his Conquerors. But it was a useless act, wasn’t it, Jhi?”

Jhi looked up at her and blinked. She nodded.

“You’re asking for my talisman too, aren’t you? You, like Halawir, want my power?”

Jhi looked at Meilin. She took a deep breath and spoke. “It isn’t power we want, Suka. It’s safety. For all of Erdas.”

There was a pause, and for a moment nothing could be heard but Suka’s slow breathing and the hushed groan of ice settling.

Rollan cleared his throat. “Dinesh gave us his Slate Elephant, as you saw. Arax would not give us the Granite Ram, but the Conquerors sought it too, and we managed to take it to keep it out of their hands. They have also claimed the Iron Boar.”

Suka snorted in anger. Her exhale was strong enough to push Meilin’s hood off her head.

“Please, Suka,” said Meilin. “I don’t think there’s any point in hiding. Zhong has already fallen. We’re all forced to take a side. I chose the Greencloaks and a fight for . . .” She looked at Jhi. “For peace.” The word felt comical to Meilin,

dramatic, a child's wish. Yet as she said it, she believed with a burning in her limbs that peace was the only thing worth fighting for.

"If the good guys don't get your talisman, the bad guys will," said Rollan.

Suka stared at him. Meilin noticed that Rollan flinched, but he straightened his shoulders and met the bear's gaze.

Suka exhaled again, this time ruffling the fur around Rollan's hood.

"Perhaps it's time for Erdas to enter a new age," said the polar bear. "Perhaps humans have become wise enough to be her stewards."

Suka lifted her paw to her teeth. With a snap, the cord broke. She caught the Crystal Polar Bear with her other paw and handed it to Rollan.

He lifted his gloved hands and reached over Suka's great claws to retrieve the talisman. Meilin noticed that his hands were shaking, but promised herself to never tease him about it.

"Thank you," Rollan said, his voice husky with emotion.

Suka rose up. "I will go. It's been ages since I ate."

Meilin heard Conor barely whisper, "I have an extra seal-fat sweet cake in my pocket."

"And I need to think," Suka said. "Times are changing. War is here. There will be a last stand. Do not be foolish, young ones. As you say, there is no hiding."

Suka bent over and gently touched noses again with Jhi. Now Jhi's whole body was barely the size of the polar bear's head. The comparison reminded Meilin of a soft panda doll she'd had as a child. That had been a different life, a different Meilin. The memory of her old, safe bed with the plush panda startled Meilin with sudden sorrow.

Then without further warning, Suka ran, her four paws sending thunder through the ice. She headed north so quickly that in moments she was out of sight.

"Three talismans now," Rollan whispered, examining the Crystal Polar Bear.

"Well done," said Tarik.

Meilin turned. She hadn't realized Tarik had joined them. He stood behind, holding Maya in his arms. Her face was pained, her leg bound.

"Jhi?" Meilin asked.

Jhi lumbered over to Maya. Tarik laid her on the ground and carefully pulled up her pant leg. Maya flinched. The calf was already showing bruising, red and purple clouding her pale skin. And from the pain etched on Maya's face, Meilin guessed it was broken.

Jhi sniffed again and then licked her calf as a mother cat might clean her kitten. Maya tensed and bit her lip, straightening her leg.

"You should probably still splint it," said Meilin, "and be careful. I'm not sure Jhi's power can heal a broken bone, but her touch might help it heal on its own a little faster."

"What does it do?" Abeke asked, indicating the talisman in Rollan's hands.

"Let's find out," said Rollan. He considered, then offered it up to Meilin. She blinked, surprised.

"Go ahead," he said.

"But Suka gave it to you," Meilin said. "That means something."

"She gave it to *us*," Rollan said. "And you are a part of us."

Surely he meant all of them — the group. But when Rollan said "us," she heard "you and me." Rollan and Meilin. The thought startled her heart.

He tossed the talisman to her, and she caught it.

Sometimes back in Zhong, boys had offered Meilin flowers. In public, she'd been the general's daughter — pretty, wealthy, harmless. She'd taken the flowers with a bow, but secretly scorned those scrub-faced boys who only paid her attention because their parents encouraged them to make nice with the daughter of a powerful man.

And here was Rollan, the street orphan, Essix on his shoulder, in the middle of icy Arctica, offering her not a flower but a talisman of great power. And she was no longer the daughter of a powerful man. She was just Meilin.

She bowed to him as she would have to those bouquet boys. And she slipped

the talisman inside her coat, placing the cold crystal against her skin.

At once she felt larger, stronger somehow. Her arms seemed to move differently. She lifted her hand, and Abeke fell over as if pushed by wind.

“Whoa,” said Meilin. “Better stand back.”

They backed away from her. Meilin moved farther from Maya, and then she punched the air.

The strength was thrilling. Her arms seemed to be longer, stronger, enlarged with huge boxing gloves made of wind. Her reach was long, the power behind her strike tremendous. She laughed.

“This is a little dangerous for close quarters,” she said. “But with this talisman I think I could stand on the ground and knock a Conqueror right off his horse.”

“Or steal a pie off a second-story windowsill,” said Rollan. “I mean, not that I would do that sort of thing, now that I’m an upstanding hero and all.”

She smiled and reached out, gently tapping Rollan on the chest from twelve feet away.



DEPARTURE

ROLLAN HOPPED AWAY FROM THE RUINS OF THE ICE PALACE with a smile on his face. He and his team had just faced certain death and come out victorious. He was . . . happy, he thought. It wasn't a feeling he was accustomed to, but it struck him more frequently since joining with Tarik on these insane Greencloak quests. Bright shafts of sunlight broke through morning clouds in the east. They shot through the holes and into the crevasse of the hidden city, making the walls of ice flash and sparkle like diamonds.

They'd found Suka. And not only had they survived, but so had the fragile Ice City.

"That's right," Rollan said to no one in particular, "I'm a verifiable hero."

He felt his smile fade as the group of Ardu men and women approached. About fifty Ardu with their animals had emerged from the city, but they were examining the great crumbling hole that had once been the majestic palace dedicated to Suka. The Great Polar Bear was gone, and all that remained of the palace was a jumble of sinking ice.

Rollan's eyes tracked the crowd, trying to find a friendly face, or even a younger face, amid the group of angry adults. His eyes settled on a girl who

looked just a little older than him. He tried his most charming smile. She frowned even harder.

“Suka is gone,” she said, in a voice so sad you’d have thought he’d killed her spirit animal.

And suddenly an enormous dog shambled forward to her side and let out some kind of demon bark. Rollan stifled a scream. It was the most horrifying dog he had ever seen. Bloated and brown, its snout was blunted and pocked with whiskers, two overlong canine teeth poking out from beneath them. Its ears had been shorn off, and it had flat, flipperlike paws that slapped the ice unpleasantly as it moved. Rollan shuddered.

The group of stern-faced Ardu stood silently till Tarik came forward.

“You will go now,” said an Ardu woman with a seagull on her shoulder. She looked older than Pia — if Pia had never drunk the pond’s water.

“We just —” Rollan started, but Tarik put a hand on his shoulder.

“We will go,” Tarik said. “I am truly sorry for the damage. I’m relieved your city is still intact, but I understand you revered Suka and the magnificent palace that held her. If there had been any other way, if there’s anything we could do —”

“You can go,” the old woman said. “That is what you can do. Go. Now.”

Tarik seemed on the verge of speaking again, but he hesitated, nodded, and began to walk, the rising sun on his left.

“Rollan, Meilin, Conor, Abeke, Maya,” he called, sounding like a father gathering up his wayward children. “We go. Now.”

As the mass of angry Ardu grew distant behind them, Rollan finally felt able to speak.

“Did you guys see that dog?” He hissed. “I almost peed my pants.”

“He means the walrus,” Meilin said. “One of the Ardu bonded with a walrus.”

“Ah,” said Tarik. “There you go, Rollan. You have seen a walrus.”

“That was a walrus?” Rollan looked back. The walrus was in front of the

Ardu, still watching. It howl-barked again. Rollan shivered.

“Creepy,” he said. “I think I might not like walruses.”

A few moments passed as they walked in silence, and Rollan felt the ever-increasing need to bring up a subject besides walruses and his fear of them.

“So what was with those guys, anyway?” he asked. “Those city Ardu? I thought they were going to cut loose with seal spears, the way they were looking at us.”

“We freed Suka,” Meilin said. “And destroyed the palace generations of their people had built.”

“We didn’t destroy it,” Rollan said. “Suka did.”

Meilin shrugged. “Part of who they are is gone, and it was our coming that made it happen.”

Rollan saw the remembrance of Zhong burning in Meilin’s eyes. He moved closer, till their shoulders touched.

“I guess,” he said. “But I mean, what were they thinking a giant monster polar bear would do if it ever got out of that ice block? I would have put good money on ‘smash, kill, and roar.’ ”

The wind shifted away from the brutally chilly west to the colder-than-imaginable north.

“Oh,” Abeke gasped, and Uraza disappeared, becoming a mark on her arm. “I want to get out of here and never, ever return again.”

“And how are we going to get supplies for our journey out of here?” Conor asked.

“I’m afraid the Ardu villagers will be less than welcoming,” Tarik said as his otter flashed back into its dormant state.

“Because of the Ice Palace thing?” Rollan asked. “How could they know? I haven’t seen any mail ponies, or mail walruses or whatever. I bet they don’t know that we’re the horrible palace destroyers of doom.”

“Nonetheless,” Tarik said, securing a rope around his waist. “We will be going directly west, to the coast. On our own.” He handed a length of rope to

Maya. “Secure this around yourself. Then Abeke, Meilin, Rollan, and Conor. Rollan and Essix have done a remarkable job warning us of crevasses, but I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Do you think Tarik wanted me in the back for a reason?” Conor whispered to Rollan once they were all tied up and walking. “I didn’t do anything to offend him, did I?”

“It’s probably just because you smell,” Rollan said.

“Ha,” Conor grumbled. “You smell at least as bad as I do.”

“No, really,” Rollan said. “I mean, like, your sense of smell is better. With your, I don’t know, wolf-snout powers, you might be able to sense if we’re being followed.”

“Oh,” said Conor, glancing behind them.

“But probably also because you stink,” Rollan said.

After what felt like hours, Rollan could make out an Ardu village in the distance — a different one than they’d left, he thought. There were maybe a dozen people watching them. Rollan could see the glint of spears in their hands.

“Can they see us?” Rollan shouted over the wind to Tarik.

Tarik turned his head toward the distant village. “Probably,” he called back. “Otherwise they wouldn’t be holding spears.”

“They suddenly don’t like us?” Rollan asked. “They must think we’re someone else.”

“Or perhaps one of the Ice City’s mail walruses got through,” Meilin said.

One end of Rollan’s rope was tied to Meilin. He tugged on it playfully, making her almost stumble. She gasped and tugged back. Hard.

Rollan flew forward, banging into Meilin. She grabbed him, trying to keep upright, and he grabbed her, trying to keep from falling. And for a moment they stood there, covered in leather and furs, and beneath it two people who were, essentially, embracing.

“Sorry,” Rollan said.

But she didn’t let go. He turned his face slightly, and the openings of their

hoods brushed together. Her face was very close. Instinctively his mind whirled, searching for something teasing to say. But Abeke beat him to it.

“If you two are done playing kissy-face,” she said, tugging on the rope.

Meilin and Rollan both pushed away from each other and began walking again.

Still, Rollan kept one hand on the rope that tied him to her.

About an hour beyond the last Ardu village, the wind began to grow so fierce that the snow it whipped up around them made it impossible to see more than a few feet. After Meilin crashed into Maya hard enough for both of them to collapse into a heap, Tarik called for camp.

MAYA

IT IS AMAZING THAT I CAN FIND THIS COMFORTABLE,” ABEKE said, sitting propped against her pack as the side of the tent near her flapped violently from the winds. “I actually feel warm. Is that odd?”

“Not so odd,” Maya said, holding her hands over a hole she had hollowed out into their “floor.” It was now warming the space with a small fire, seal fat burning in a pan as they’d learned from the Ardu. All six of them were crammed together, but the others were sleepy from the long day, already dozing against the pillows of their packs.

“That is incredible,” Abeke said, leaning closer to the fire. She spoke softly, so their conversation wouldn’t disturb the others. “All of our animals are fantastic, but what you do feels truly like magic.”

Maya flushed. “Thank you, but to me, what you do, what all of you do, is magic.”

“Summon our beasts? You do the same.”

“Not that,” Maya said, “though I think what you do with that bow might qualify as magic. No, what I mean is how each of you can do this, all of this, and not be . . . be *afraid*.”

Abeke closed her eyes. "I think none of us are without fear."

Maya nodded. "I'm sure that's true. But I guess I . . ." She took off her right glove and held her hand out to Abeke, palm down and low, as if worried someone else might wake up and see. Her hand was shaking.

"You're freezing," Abeke whispered. "Put your glove back on!"

Maya smiled. "Take my hand. Just hold it for a second."

Abeke took Maya's hand in hers, fully expecting to rub some warmth into it as Conor had done for her feet, but Maya's hand was as warm as if she was sitting on a beach in Nilo.

"I never really get too cold anymore, as long as Tini stays warm." At the mention of his name, the little salamander poked his pointed head up from under Maya's scarf and darted back under again.

Abeke looked down at Maya's hand in hers, shaking. She was reluctant to let it go. It was a comforting warmth to her own cold hands, but she also felt Maya needed something. Something she wasn't sure how to give.

"I'm not cold," Maya whispered, her voice hoarse. "I'm *scared*." She took her quaking hand back from Abeke and gripped both her hands together, as if trying to force them to be still. "What happened in the Ice Palace . . . the bear, the roaring, the walls broken, the ice shattering, the screaming . . ." She shut her eyes. "I almost died. We all almost died."

"But we didn't," Abeke said, smiling.

"We didn't," Maya said, returning Abeke's smile with a sad one of her own. "But something in me — I don't know . . ." She looked at her hand, still visibly quivering. "I don't feel . . ." Her voice began to shake as hard as her hand. "I don't feel right anymore. If anything . . . anything else happens . . ."

Maya shook her head, flashed an apologetic smile, and lay down, her face turned away.

Later, amid the sounds of sleep, as Abeke lay wondering how one could fix things that are broken on the inside, she heard the flap of the tent open and close.

She sat up, wary of an intruder. All bedrolls were quietly occupied, except one. Meilin's spot was empty, the overcoat she used as a blanket cast aside.

As Abeke began to shrug on her own topcoat, Rollan sat up, looked at her, and then at the empty bedroll. "Meilin?" he mouthed silently.

Abeke nodded, and Rollan held up a finger, as if to say "Wait."

She did, but every second that passed she thought of Meilin out there in the snow, freezing without her coat. Finally she shook her head, twisted the toggles that would keep her outer coat on, and rose. Rollan's finger became a hand, palm out, and then two hands. "Hold on," he mouthed.

A few seconds later, the tarp parted, and Meilin quietly padded in. She lay down on her bedroll and began to snore.

Abeke raised her hands, palms up, and mouthed "What?!" to Rollan.

He raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and dropped back into his bed.

Abeke lay down, her coat still on, and crossed her arms over her chest. What was that? Did Meilin do that often? Often enough for Rollan to know about it, obviously, but what did it mean? Was Meilin broken too?

Abeke sighed. Obviously, her brain was not going to let her sleep much tonight.

She drifted, waking often at every noise, her mind trying to solve all the problems — Maya, Meilin, Shane, and the Greencloaks.

She must have slept for a time, because when she woke again, a faint glow bled through the tent flap. She wrapped her coat and bedroll around herself and went out, finding Conor sitting on his pack, Briggan beside him.

"It's peaceful, alone in the morning," Conor whispered, so as not to wake the others.

"I can leave you alone —" Abeke started.

"No, sit. You're not company."

"Um . . . thanks?" said Abeke.

"I meant," said Conor, "being with you is like being with family. You're someone I can relax with."

Abeke sat.

Conor laid his hand on Briggan, wriggling his fingers into his fur. Abeke released Uraza, and the leopard stretched and yawned, showing off her sharp teeth, and then curled up on Abeke's lap as if to get warm. She was much too large, spilling off of Abeke's legs. Abeke put her arms around Uraza's neck and lay her cheek on the top of her head. Uraza purred.

"It's so bleak and cold, no sheep for hundreds of miles," Conor whispered, "but the sun rises everywhere on Erdas. The sun is just as cheerfully yellow here as it is in Eura."

"But muted," said Abeke. "I miss the fierce strength of the Niloan sun."

She heard the rustle of movement within the tent.

"Was it a dream that woke you, Conor?" Tarik asked from behind.

"No," Conor said, fidgeting a little. "Well, yes, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't significant."

"Tell me," Tarik said.

"No, really," Conor said. "It was silly. It was, like, a shoe dream."

"I'm sorry?" Tarik said, confused.

"We were on the ice and we all had weird shoes," Conor said, as if embarrassed, but now committed to getting the story out. "Yours were furry and had tails that moved. Rollan didn't so much have shoes as tiny little wings on his ankles. Meilin had on boots that looked like dumplings, with really long green laces that seemed to trail behind us for miles."

"I see," Tarik said, the hint of a smile on his lips. "And the dumpling shoes shocked you to wakefulness."

"No, not that." Conor glanced at Abeke and back at his hands. "Abeke had, like, these fantastic slippers made from fire, which of course kept her feet warm, but also started to melt the ice. She started sinking down, and nobody noticed but me. I tried to run to her but my shoes, they . . ."

"Yes," Tarik prodded.

"They . . . they were walruses," Conor said. "Like, little foot-sized walruses

with their tusks stuck in the ice. They wouldn't let me run. Abeke fell into the water under the ice, and then I woke up."

"If only it were true," she said. "I could use a good bath right now."

Conor smiled at her, but then he stared a little too long at her face. "Oh, you look terrible," he said.

Abeke rubbed her face. "Well, thank you. If nothing else, I can perhaps achieve perfect unpleasantness on this trip."

"What? No! Er . . . what I mean is, um, not that you . . ."

"You look *tired*," Rollan interrupted, emerging from the tent. "I think that's what he means."

"Yes!" Conor said. "Are you okay? Did you not sleep?"

Tarik had walked to the opposite end of camp and was staring intently at the horizon.

"Rollan," he called. "Can you see the coast from here? It should be directly west of us."

"I had difficulty sleeping, yes," Abeke said. "Meilin's night walking had me worried and up thinking for hours."

"Wait, what?" Conor said. "Meilin was out walking at night again?"

"Yes," Abeke said. "Without a coat even."

"I can't see anything!" Rollan called back to Tarik, and then he turned to Abeke. "It's nothing. We've seen her do it before, and she doesn't like to be interrupted. Maybe it's a kind of meditation for her. Anyway, she always comes back."

"Is she sleepwalking?" said Conor. "The Greencloaks say sleepwalking is a normal part of bonding."

"Meilin is well and truly bonded by now," Abeke said.

A drowsy voice called from inside the tent. "Okay! I'm up! Stop calling my name!"



THE DOCKS

THE COAST HAD BEEN CLOSER THAN ROLLAN THOUGHT. TARIK assured them that it was only a few hours' march away, but Rollan had been convinced he was just saying that to raise their spirits. But now they walked with the afternoon sun angled to their right, the salty sea air thickening the wind. They didn't get too close to the water, afraid of thin ice, but Rollan's sharp eyes could see slate-blue sea and the sharp white cracks of waves.

The goal was to get to an Ardu settlement and get a ferry to carry them to Eura. They had stopped their march for the moment, and Tarik was investigating something on the ground. Bug droppings, maybe. It seemed to Rollan that they were stopping like this every few minutes.

"Are we lost, Tarik?" Rollan called, loud enough for everyone to hear. Essix, on his shoulder, fluttered her wings.

"No," Tarik said.

"Because it looks to me like we're lost," Rollan said.

"We are not lost," Tarik said.

They walked in silence for several minutes, which Rollan figured was a few minutes too long.

“Not that I don’t enjoy a good walk around an entire continent of ice,” Rollan said, “but is there a reason we didn’t just go back to where we crossed to get here in the first place? As nasty as it was, at least we knew that route.”

And suddenly Rollan was attacked. What felt to him like a giant centipede leaped onto the back of his leg, skittered up his back, and clamped onto his head. Rollan screamed. He was certain it was going to either eat his eyes or lay eggs in his brain, or both.

“Get it off!” he yelled, running in circles, too afraid to touch the thing with his own hands for fear of losing a finger to the thing’s inevitable teeth.

And then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the weight on his head was gone. He looked around and saw Lumeo scamper up to Tarik and crawl into his coat. Then Rollan noticed the laughing. Maya and Abeke were giggling, and Conor was bent over, laughing those deep belly guffaws. Color rushed to Rollan’s face.

Meilin wasn’t laughing, but she was smiling, which might normally have made him feel mocked, but for some reason it didn’t. Her smile made him smile.

“Yeah, so I thought Lumeo was a giant, carnivorous centipede,” Rollan said, laughing.

Only Tarik stayed exactly as he was. “We’re taking a different route back to Eura, and Greenhaven,” he said, answering Rollan’s question as if he hadn’t just scared the life out of him with an otter attack. “Because I want to avoid Shane and his people.”

Rollan grunted.

“We have been stopping to look for seal holes,” Tarik continued, “like the one over there. We are officially out of food. And what our animals have been able to scavenge will not be enough to sustain us.”

Rollan had mixed feelings about this. True, he was hungry, and while seal would not have been his first choice of meal, he didn’t mind it. It was really the stabbing and the skinning he didn’t like. There were kids on the streets of Concorba who would skin and eat rats, but just watching one of the other kids

skin a rat made him lose his appetite. It seemed simpler, less cruel, and slightly less gross to get his food from garbage heaps. Unfortunately, there were none of those in Arctica.

“Is the great survivor of an otter attack going to restore his honor by spearing us dinner?” Conor asked.

“Um,” Rollan started, ready to bow out of the whole process, when he saw Meilin looking at him and for some reason abruptly changed his opinion. “Get me a spear,” he said.

And then they waited. And waited. And waited. Realistically, Rollan thought, it had probably only been an hour from the short distance the sun had traveled, but lying motionless on the ice tended to make time pass very slowly.

After another ninety-seven hours — at least according to Rollan’s reckoning — he thought he saw some movement. Rollan cocked his spear arm back. Something broke the surface of the water in the hole, and Tarik struck first, throwing his own spear at the mark, barely missing. There was a terrible cracking sound, and the ice buckled under Rollan’s feet, pushed upward from below.

“Get back!” Conor shouted, and Rollan did, just in time to see a demon emerge from the ice.

“WALRUS!” Rollan screamed. He scrambled back, unable to do anything but point at the beast that had emerged from the ice. Tusks swung at Tarik, who darted to one side to avoid being hit, but his otter-enhanced speed did not match well with the ice underfoot, and his feet spun out from under him.

“WALRUS!” Rollan yelled again, still pointing, still scrambling backward, but afraid to tear his gaze away from the thing. Abeke and Meilin loosed their spears at the same time, but they missed as the walrus charged. Meilin dodged, sliding into a roll that put her next to Tarik, who was back on his feet. Abeke skittered backward from the galloping behemoth as its bulk plowed into her, knocking her flat on the ice. The walrus raised its tusks to strike, and Uraza

flared into existence. The great cat let out such a roar that the walrus actually stopped.

Briggan and Uraza both leaped, but the walrus slipped back into the hole with a splash.

Rollan's backward scramble had stopped when he hit a snowdrift, and as the walrus disappeared, he realized he was still pointing at where it had been. Maya was beside him, pressed against the snowdrift too, knees pulled to her chest, eyes wide. Her eyes darted to his.

"Walrus," Rollan rasped, voice hoarse from shouting. She nodded, and he dropped his hand, sore from pointing so hard.

"Well," said Tarik, "we would make terrible Ardu hunters."

They started on again. Rollan was full of nervous energy, walking twice as fast as the others.

"That was not a seal," he said. "That was supposed to be a seal. That was a seal *hole*. But that wasn't a seal. That was NOT a seal!"

At the next seal hole, they waited again, and were at last rewarded with a seal — no tusks, no charging, no walrus rage.

Abeke's arrow struck the seal's neck. She knelt beside it and whispered, "I'm sorry to take your life, friend. My . . . my family here needs your meat to survive. I took a shot I knew was true and would give the least amount of pain. Thank you; in your death you have saved our lives."

Everyone was quiet for some time after that.

Tarik, Conor, and Meilin busied themselves with cleaning and stripping the seal of its meat, parceling out chunks to eat now and chunks to carry with them. Maya put some seal fat into their metal pan and set it afire, though it was too small to cook over. Maya could sear the meat with her power but could not maintain the flow of fire long enough to cook it properly. Most preferred to eat it raw, like the Ardu. Maya moved away, to stand alone and watch the sea, and Abeke went to her, putting an arm around her back.



They traveled in peace for two more days, living off seal meat and two mutilated somethings that Great Essix hunted. Gradually, rocky land emerged from the ice, and another Ardu village perched on its southern coast. Rollan didn't care about the boat, didn't care about crossing, he just wanted to trade them whatever property he had for a good chicken-and-potato stew, though a nice corn hash with sweet peppers wouldn't go amiss.

But the village didn't have any chicken stew. They had seal stew, and seal brains, and some kind of crustless pie with meat that was probably pieces of whatever animal it was that Essix had brought them. So when Tarik suggested they just take the boat and be done, Rollan didn't object.

This boat was larger than their last ferry, flat and wider, low to the water and not full of quite so many dead fish. As the boat approached the coast of Northern Eura, Rollan began to discern the outlines of small buildings and familiar shapes. He sighed, relieved. These looked like the proper buildings of his upbringing, the kind that people who eat chicken stew might build.

They clambered onto the docks and Tarik pressed something into the hand of the boat's captain, which seemed to make him happy. The man bent his head and whispered something to Tarik, who nodded, and walked over to the group.

"The captain has told me that something is wrong," Tarik said.

"Like it's warmer than frozen here, and it doesn't smell of dead seal?" Rollan asked.

"Like the dockworkers are missing," Tarik said. "The captain said there are always people from the village here when boats arrive, to help unload cargo and offer goods and services." He looked to the captain, who remained on his boat. He appeared to be waiting for something.

"What does that mean?" Meilin asked.

"It might mean nothing," Tarik said. "It might be a holiday for them."

The group visibly relaxed.

“Or it might mean the enemy is here,” he said, and Rollan heard Maya moan.

“Why is the captain just waiting there?” Conor asked.

“We need to decide if we’re staying,” Tarik said. “Or if we’re worried enough to go back to Arctica with the ferry.”

“Turn back?” Rollan asked. “To the ice and cold and walruses? No, thank you.”

“That’s one vote for stay,” Tarik said. “Meilin?”

“I say stay,” she said. “Turning back is not an option.”

“Conor?”

“I actually think it might be smarter to go back,” he said. “Not for *good*, mind you, just . . . I don’t know, this.” He gestured at the empty dock. “This all feels unsettling.”

“Maya?”

“Go,” she said. “Leave. I vote we go back.”

“That’s two stay, two go. Abeke?”

“I don’t know,” she said, turning to look at the sea, and Arctica beyond. “It’s so cold back there.” She stopped, scanning the faces of Maya and Conor. She sighed. “I am fine with either. Whatever you decide, Tarik.”

“We stay, then,” Tarik said, and nodded to the captain, who began unlashng his boat for departure.

“We will stay together,” Tarik said, looking at all of them in turn. “If we cannot find transport in an hour, we begin to walk. Together.”

The boat began paddling away, and Maya kept pace with it on the dock. When she ran out of walking room, she stood there and watched it go.

“I smell sheepskin,” Conor said.

“What?” said Rollan. “You smell sheepskin? That’s just weird.”

“It is,” said Tarik, looking to the village before them. “I haven’t noticed any clothing made of Euran sheepskin this close to Arctica.”

Rollan saw Essix circling ahead, and his eyes drifted down to the top of a dock-facing building. There were people there, on the roof. The sun was just

starting to fall behind them, making it difficult to focus.

“Shane,” Rollan said, squinting. “And those impostor kids. That blond frog girl, Tahlia, and Ana, the one with the lizard. I think maybe one other I don’t recognize.”

And his mother.

His entire life, an awareness of his lost mother had lain against his heart, like an arrowhead too deep to pull out. But he’d tried to forget her those long days on the ice. He’d tried.

Rollan took a few steps closer.

“There are a lot of people,” Rollan said. “On all the rooftops.”

“Archers,” said Meilin.

“We’re outnumbered at least five to one,” said Rollan. He amazed himself by keeping his voice calm.

“I, um, I don’t suppose they would just go away if we asked them nicely?” Maya asked. She glanced back, and Rollan looked too. The ferryboat was gone.

“Probably not,” Conor said, his hands balling into fists.

“Maybe,” Abeke said, and everyone turned to her like she had told a rude joke.

“Really,” she continued. “Let me speak to Shane. He can be reasonable.”

“I have my doubts,” Tarik said, “but you’re welcome to try.”

“Don’t go without Uraza free,” Conor said.

Abeke shook her head. “Shane hasn’t released his wolverine. I would seem antagonistic if I didn’t keep Uraza in passive.”

Abeke walked several steps forward and waved. Rollan imagined he could see Shane smile, but he wasn’t sure what kind of a smile it was.

“This is a bad idea,” Conor growled. “That guy is a weasel.”

The figures in Shane’s group disappeared off the roof, but the others remained.

“I think we should stay with Abeke,” Conor said, moving. “In case Shane tries to pull something.”

“We’re close,” Tarik said. “I don’t want to appear threatening. I . . . I rather think a peaceful solution is our best option with the current odds. Let’s give her a chance. If something happens, she’s quick enough to get out of danger and give us a chance to engage.”

Conor growled again.

“I think you might be turning into a wolf,” Rollan said.

Conor stared as Shane hopped down from the building’s roof, waving at Conor like they were old friends.

“I want to punch that guy in the face,” he said.

Rollan nodded. “Some people do have faces like that. Though I’ve been told mine is one, and I disagree. I have never wanted to punch myself in the face.”

Rollan felt himself rambling. He shut his mouth and looked down, aware of Aidana nearby, watching him.

He’d left in the night. He’d abandoned her in Samis and run like a coward from an uncomfortable decision.

“I’m moving in,” Conor said. Tarik raised an eyebrow.

“Just there,” Conor said, pointing to where the dock planking hit dirt. “I want to be on dry land.”

“Okay,” Tarik said. “We all go, slowly. Just there, like Conor said. A respectful distance.”

“Oh,” Maya said, her eyes searching the water as if hoping for the ferry to return. No other boats were in sight. “Tarik? I’m just going to sit over here . . . at the end of the dock . . . and . . . and watch the sea, okay?”

Tarik nodded, watching Abeke speak with Shane. They were walking slowly, almost idly.

“He’s leading Abeke to those crates,” Conor said. “Like a herder, nudging his flock.”

Rollan wasn’t so sure. Conor was often jumping to conclusions, but they *were* getting farther away.

“They’re coming back now,” Tarik said. Shane and Abeke had turned. Abeke

waved to get their attention.

“Good news!” Abeke yelled over to them. “They’ve agreed to a trade!”

A trade? What did Shane have that the Greencloaks wanted?

Tahlia was suddenly beside Tarik, her hideous flat frog lying on the palm of her hand. “You will give us the bear’s talisman.” She smiled coldly. “And we will return Uraza to you.”

Rollan frowned. Shane was next to Abeke, smiling as they spoke. Did he know what these two were saying? His hand was holding Abeke’s arm like a gentleman might hold a lady, but his hand was directly over the tattoo of Uraza.

Ana, her lizard scrambling around her ankles, spoke in a soft tone, so her voice would not carry to Abeke. “Shane is too much of a diplomat, so Zerif made sure we came along and enforced the plan. He was *especially* hurt by Abeke’s betrayal. We will return Uraza, after we have cut her from the Niloan’s flesh. Perhaps the Greencloaks can bind the wound and make the union fresh, if you are quick about it.”

Tarik had paled. Rollan thought all of this talk about cutting Uraza away was rubbish, but Tarik seemed to be taking something about it seriously.

“Now,” the girl said, holding out a sack. “The talisman, please.”

No one moved. Shane looked over toward their group, still holding on to Abeke, his brow furrowed. Somewhere farther inland, a dog barked.

“Wait!” Shane yelled suddenly.

Without warning, Conor released Briggan. The wolf leaped directly from Conor’s arm to on top of Tahlia. Her frog dropped to the ground with a splat. Ana’s lizard hissed at the wolf, baring needlelike teeth. Like everyone else apparently, Rollan was so distracted by Briggan he didn’t notice Conor run until he’d crossed the space and rammed his shoulder into Shane’s middle, knocking him away from Abeke.

“Leave her alone!” Conor shouted.

Other Conquerors, several with spirit animals of their own, moved forward to attack, but suddenly Briggan was there. And Briggan was huge.

Conor was wearing the Slate Elephant.

The wolf was the size of an elephant, his cobalt-blue eyes cold with rage, his canines exposed with each mad bark. The Conquerors lifted weapons, but Briggan swiped at the first wave with his paw, knocking them flat.

Tarik whirled, sweeping the feet out from underneath Ana and Tahlia with a low kick, spinning into a leap that landed him directly behind them and ready to strike. As he did so, Rollan saw a bear of a man stalk from the shadows. He took two deliberate steps toward Tarik, clamped his arm underneath Tarik's chin, and began to squeeze.

Rollan ran toward Tarik, unsure what he could possibly do against this beast of a man, now holding Tarik off the ground by his neck. As Rollan sprinted, an arrow flew past his head close enough for him to feel the fletching. He stumbled, stepping on something soft and wet, which sent him sprawling. Tahlia screamed. As he skidded to a rest on his rear, he saw it had been her frog, now sitting splat in the dirt. He couldn't tell if he had killed it or not. Tahlia looked at him with rage in her eyes and drew a throwing knife.

Rollan threw up his arms in an attempt to protect his face from flying steel, but nothing came. He scrambled to his feet and saw Meilin engaging both Tahlia and Ana with effortless grace. They struck, she spun. They kicked, she twisted. It looked like she was dancing. Rollan watched, almost forgetting it was a fight until Meilin planted a fist into the face of Ana, knocking her flat to the ground.

Everything was happening so fast. Fights breaking out. The roofs in motion. Scores of Conquerors teeming toward them. Rollan ran toward Meilin to help, though she didn't seem to need it. Her moves were so quick, Jhi must be in active state.

Then he saw the panda, sitting in the shadow of a stack of crates. Rollan heard the release of arrows. He didn't falter, running toward Meilin. She adjusted something under her coat, faced the oncoming arrows, and punched them out of the air.

The Crystal Polar Bear, Rollan realized.

Punch after punch, the arrows came at her and Jhi, but Meilin's invisibly extended arms swiped them out of the air, knocking them off course before they could strike her spirit animal.

"This way," a voice said.

Rollan whirled. Aidana gestured frantically.

"This will only get worse," she said. "Come with me."

"I can't," said Rollan. "My friends —"

"I need you to trust me now, Rollan," said Aidana. Panic lit her eyes, and she seemed as fierce and as beautiful as a bird of prey. "Now, Rollan!"

She disappeared around a large, square building. Rollan raced to the corner where his mother had gone, the noise of the battle prickling at his mind like a swarm of bees, no individual words distinguishable until he heard a new voice, a shriek, something that reminded him of the sound he had heard a cat make once when struck by a passing cart. But this sound had words in it.

"STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT!" the voice said.

Rollan whirled to look.

And then there was fire.

FIRE

ABEKE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND. EVERYTHING HAD BEEN FINE. Shane had promised he could get the Conquerors to leave in peace if they traded him the Crystal Polar Bear for the Iron Boar.

“It isn’t safe for any one group to hold them all,” Shane had said, “no matter how well intentioned. We just need to understand each talisman. But we won’t steal the polar bear and leave you with none. I promise I won’t let them.”

Power sharing made a kind of sense, especially if it would allow her friends to go free. But then Briggan had pounced, and arrows began to fly.

When Conor plowed into Shane, Shane was still holding Abeke’s arm, and the three of them spiraled into a heap onto the cobblestones below. Abeke felt like the end of a whip, riding a wave of movement that ended with her head smacking the ground.

She rolled to one side, stunned. Trying to stand, her vision wavered, and she dropped to one knee, blinking several times. She could feel the irritation of blood dripping down her ear, but the sight before her drove any other thoughts out of her mind. Men and women and animals everywhere, thrashing, swarming, fighting. Fighting her friends.

Her eyes were drawn to four or five animals surrounding Jhi. Two wild dogs, a common house cat, a goat, and a stag were just staring at the panda. They had to be some of the Conquerors' spirit animals, but they weren't attacking.

A soldier barreled into Jhi, pushing her sideways. He raised a sword.

"Stop!" Abeke yelled, but the sounds of fury around her were too loud to be overcome. She saw one of the dogs bite the soldier's arm before Abeke was knocked to the ground.

A body had rolled into her, and she felt sweat or water or blood spatter her with the impact. She reached out, uncertain whether she was in danger, but wanting to help, no matter who it was.

It was Conor. He grabbed her hand.

"Are you okay? You're bleeding," he said, pointing to her right temple with a finger that looked like it had been bitten by a crocodile.

"You're bleeding too," she managed to say.

Between her and the buildings of the village — were those archers on top? — a figure stood, hand raised. The sun was behind him, washing out everything but a silhouette, yet Abeke knew it was Shane. His hand was splayed out, high, as if trying to hold back a sky filled with a dark swarm of birds. No, not birds. Arrows. Arrows arcing up, up, up to the sky, and now down. It seemed to Abeke like hundreds of shots had been taken at the sun, and having failed to reach their destination, changed targets. To her.

Instinct took over, and she seemed to no more think about calling Uraza out than she thought about making her own heart beat. Even as the leopard leaped forward, Abeke leaped too, her stride lengthened, her strength increased.

Abeke landed and rolled. The movement made her head spin, and she was certain that had she not been as hungry as she was, her last meal would have left her stomach. A dozen shafts plunged into the earth beside her. Much fewer than the hundreds she'd thought she'd seen. She wasn't thinking straight. She felt herself start to shake as her body seemed to realize before her mind that when

she'd leaped away from the arrows, Conor had not. He lay hunched over, head bowed, three arrows lodged in his back.

He sat up suddenly and she gasped, stunned he was still alive.

"Abeke!" Conor yelled. "We've got to get to Meilin. Get *behind* Meilin!"

He stood, dropping his pack, and the arrows with it.

"Only one got through," he said. "And just barely. I'll be okay."

There was another shout from Shane, and Abeke saw he had two hands up this time, waving them desperately. There were more arrows. More than a dozen. More than they could dodge. More than they could live through. She closed her eyes.

The heat of the sun on her face disappeared, and she opened her eyes to shadow, a huge shape blocking the sun. She heard the sound of dozens of arrows hitting a target different than intended, like an awkward chorus of rugs being beaten clean, and she found herself still alive and arrow free. The shape between her and the archers moved, and the light caught a rippling of gray fur. Briggan! Great Briggan, made huge by the Slate Elephant, was nearly the size of a real elephant.

His fur was so thick, the arrows didn't seem to have penetrated his skin. Conor jumped on the wolf's back and raised his shepherd's crook like some kind of shepherd king going to war.

"Get on!" he shouted.

"I'll run with Uraza," Abeke said.

Conor seemed about to argue, but a dozen soldiers were running at him. The wolf growled a sound like the end of the world, and for a moment, everything was quiet but for the whimpering of several animals that Abeke could not see. Then the Great Wolf leaped at the soldiers, and it all began again.

Briggan scattered the men, grabbing one between his powerful jaws. Abeke heard a sharp crack and the Great Wolf threw the body aside to snap at an approaching ox and its rider.

Abeke ducked behind some crates as more arrows flew. There seemed to be

hundreds of Conquerors, and no one was listening to Shane. He'd stop them if he could, she knew, but the frenzy of battle swept away all thought and reason.

A great maned lion pounced. Abeke only noticed a blur of yellow before Uraza's answering yowl raised the hairs on her arms. While the two cats fought, Abeke nocked an arrow. The swirl of golden bodies made targeting the lion impossible. She glanced up and spotted more archers on the roof. She saw one turn, targeting Conor on the back of Briggan. Abeke aimed and shot. The archer fell from the roof.

Uraza bumped her knee. The lion was still. Abeke put a hand on her spirit animal's head.

"To Meilin," she said.

They began to run. In her periphery, she saw Conor duck behind Great Briggan as more arrows shot from the tops of buildings, striking the wolf. It seemed impossible that his thick coat could deflect them all. And even the largest beast could be slain with sufficient ammunition and strategy. They needed strategy. In this kind of wild fighting, the side with the most fighters always won. And that meant she and her friends were sure to lose. And die.

Abeke looked frantically for Tarik, and found him struggling in the grip of a man twice his size, his otter thrashing crazily, trying to escape the coils of a tremendous boa constrictor, aiming sharp bites at the snake's head.

She ran toward the Greencloak, staying low. She aimed her arrow, but afraid of hitting Tarik, she was only able to shoot his attacker in the knee.

She and Uraza started for Meilin again, but were struck by a wave of force, a flat wall of wind that shoved her heavily off her feet, through the air several feet, and onto the ground yards from Meilin, who shouted something at her. The Zhongian was standing over the bodies of Zerif's two impostor girls, slapping wildly at the air like an old madwoman, oblivious to the lizard biting at her boot. Abeke thought Meilin had lost all sense until she spotted the masses of arrows being shot at her from all sides. Meilin's face was tight with concentration,

unable to do anything but focus on keeping herself, and Jhi behind her, defended from the onslaught.

A badger flew at Abeke, stopped midair by Uraza.

Meilin needed help. Abeke looked desperately at the battlefield. Where was Rollan? Was he dead? And Maya?

“Abeke!” she heard Maya yell, as if in answer to her thought. Abeke spun to see the red-haired Euran still standing at the edge of the docks, eyes wide like she had seen a whole army of ghosts. She was pointing to Abeke’s left with a terrified hand.

“GREENCLOAK FILTH!” Tahlia shouted, suddenly much closer and much less unconscious than Abeke had supposed. The Conqueror twitched her arm, and a knife flew straight and true into Abeke’s shoulder.

For a moment, Abeke felt no pain, only rocked back by the force of the impact. She stared at the leather-wrapped hilt sticking out of her shoulder, stunned just long enough for Tahlia to kick a booted foot into Abeke’s face. She fell back, and the impostor girl dropped roughly onto her chest and yanked the knife free. Then Abeke felt pain, and screamed.

“Louder!” Tahlia spat.

Uraza, apparently finished with the badger, pounced, knocking Tahlia off Abeke.

Abeke scrambled for her bow, but a heavy war hammer slammed down. Abeke rolled back in time, but the hammer shattered her bow.

She looked up into the face of a huge man, his brown hair tied in two braids. His face was covered with scars, and his mouth was a cruel grimace. He lifted his hammer and struck again. Abeke scabbled over a crate and just missed getting crushed.

She heard Uraza’s yowls, the calls of a leopard deep in a fight. Her cat could not come to her. Abeke pulled a dagger from her boot with her right hand. Her left shoulder stung with the knife wound, her left arm dangling. The braided man

swung his hammer again. Abeke ducked, but he followed with a fist punch to the side of her head.

Her vision clouded and her head dropped to the ground, eyes facing the battle. She wished she had fallen looking the other way, because here she saw the dead and nearly dead. She saw Meilin turn to look at her, a moment of inattention that rewarded her with an arrow to her thigh. She saw Conor knocked from the back of Briggan, striking the wall of a nearby building hard, and slumping to the ground. She saw Briggan flicker, return to his natural size, and run limping, to Conor's side.

And in a huge mass, the Conqueror army swarmed forward.

There was a scream, and Abeke shuddered. She had hoped when the time came for her to die, she would do it with dignity. But the scream was one of mad lunatic fear, an animal scream. This was not the way she wished to end. Abeke pressed her lips together to stop the shriek, and found they were shut already. The scream was not hers.

“STOP IT!” the voice yelled.

By now that war hammer should have struck again, ending Abeke. She opened eyes that she had screwed shut and saw the soldier's braids blacken, turn into ash, and blow away in the wind.

“STOP IT!” came the voice again.

The soldier's face screwed up in a grimace of pain, raising his arms in an attempt to protect himself from an onslaught of heat. His sleeves started to char, catching fire like a log in a campfire. Abeke struggled to turn her head away from the sight.

“STOP IT!” the voice shrieked, and Abeke spotted Maya on the docks, eyes wide, lips pulled back to bare clenched teeth, her hand a rigid claw held high above her head. A wave of heat like a desert storm rolled across the dockside, the pulse of white light burning into Abeke's vision. Abeke held her arms in front of her head and opened her mouth to shout but the air in her lungs was

pulled from her in a hot gasp. She felt like she had looked into the face of the sun on a midsummer's day, and the sun had looked back and screamed.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the wave was gone. Maya lowered her arms and blinked. Everything was on fire. People, animals, buildings, crates. Conquerors ran in circles or toward the water, covered in flames, screaming. Abeke slapped at her clothing, hoping to douse flames that she soon found were not there. She drew back her hands, now smeared with a greasy, gray ash. She stood, and something thumped off her belly and onto the ground. It was the steel head of the war hammer — the wooden shaft burned away — covered in the same greasy ash that covered Abeke. Ash, she now realized, that had once been a braided soldier.

THE BILE

THE DOCKS WERE AFLAME. FOR A MOMENT, ROLLAN THOUGHT the Conquerors had unleashed mythological fire demons upon them, as the flames danced and ran like men. Then he realized they were men. On fire. Many were running haphazardly to the shore, some rolling on the ground. Others, those that appeared not to be actively on fire, were running the other direction, away from the docks and the battle.

Rollan scanned the scene desperately for his friends and found them unburned, small islands in a sea of flame. Conor, mouth agape, watched a fiery shape plunge into the sea. Meilin, covered in ash, held a blackened arrow, tip still flaming, staring at it like a confused wizard holding an unfamiliar wand. Abeke was slumped against the only crates not on fire, her hand covering a bleeding shoulder. She was staring at the dock, where Maya was kneeling, as if she had collapsed. Her head was down, her whole body slumped except for her right arm, extended palm up in front of her. It was like an invisible force was holding that arm, keeping her from falling.

A figure emerged from the water. Shane. He was burned and bedraggled, but very much alive.

“FORM UP!” he shouted.

A few others pulled themselves upright, and Rollan noticed several heads appear on the rooftops. Far fewer than there had been before. But still many more than the five Greencloaks.

“Come on, Rollan,” Aidana said, suddenly behind him.

“I need to help my friends,” he said.

“No, you don’t. Not by running into the fray and getting killed.”

She grabbed his wrist and pulled him, running.

“What was that!?” he gasped, slowing his pace.

“The docks are on fire,” his mother said. “We keep moving.”

“Did you know this was going to happen? Did your people set off a . . . a . . . fire bomb or something?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said.

Rollan opened his mouth to speak, but Aidana squeezed his hand and looked in his eyes. “I only knew there would be a fight, and that it would turn ugly, and that your friends’ side would have no chance. I didn’t want you there.”

Essix was nowhere to be seen, but Rollan knew she was telling the truth. People from the town pushed past them, running toward the blaze. They were carrying buckets. He stared at the flickering bit of dock he could see, mesmerized.

“We should go help,” he muttered. He felt strangely numb, as if he were just a boy in the audience of a town-square trouper show, just watching, unable to take part.

“The townspeople will help,” Aidana said. “The Greencloaks must have caused it. They bring destruction wherever they go.”

Destruction, like an ice palace in ruins.

“My friends . . .” he mumbled.

“Your friends?” Aidana’s voice broke. “I’m your *mother*, Rollan. Please, son, I need you. Your friends, they use you. The Greencloaks are a violent bunch, intent on ruling the world, and liars all. Someone in your party told the Devourer

you had Suka's talisman and where you would cross back into Eura. All we had to do was wait."

"No. No! None of them would —"

"How else could we have been waiting for you?" said Aidana. "You can't trust them, but you can trust me. I'm your blood."

Rollan shook his head. He could find no words.

"Let's go, Rollan," she said. "Not with Shane, not with the Greencloaks, let's just go somewhere and be a family. Away from all this." Her voice broke at the end, and her chin trembled.

He nodded. The trouper show continued on behind him, with the battle and the burning, as far away as a dream. But his mother held his hand, and her hand was warm. Only she felt real. He started to follow her down the alley, away from the noise.

A cry from high above. Essix pierced the smoke-filled sky and streaked toward him. She landed on his shoulder and firmly clamped her talons onto him, steadying herself.

"It would seem Essix agrees," Aidana said.

With Essix on his shoulder, Rollan's head cleared. He blinked, looked again into his mother's eyes, and nearly stumbled backward. For just a moment, he swore her eyes changed. Her pupils narrowed, her irises lightened to the yellow of tarnished brass.

"Rollan, is there —"

"What happened to you?" he asked, his voice trembling. Essix squeezed his shoulder, and he thought he saw faint black lines ghost about his mother, streaming away from her head, hands, and feet. Rollan took a step back.

The smoky string drifting from Aidana's left hand pulsed, and her arm shot forward spasmodically, gripping Rollan's wrist.

"Let go!" he shouted and tugged his arm back. "What's the matter with you? Stop it!"

Aidana's arm flopped with his effort, like the slackened arm of a doll, but her

grip was like a vise. He winced with the pain. Any more pressure and he was sure his bones would break.

“Please,” she said, teeth clenched as if it were she feeling the pain, and then closed her eyes. He watched her brow furrow, and the black lines flickered. She let go, breathing heavily as if she’d just run a mile. “It’s not what you think.”

Essix shifted her weight and Rollan realized the black trails behind his mother were gone. He hadn’t imagined them, had he? No, those snake eyes. He’d seen those eyes.

“Something more is going on. Something is clinging to you — inside you —” Aidana shook her head despairingly.

“I didn’t know,” she said. “I only took the Bile to make the sickness go away. I wanted to be myself again. I wanted to be your *mother*.” Tears wobbled in her eyes. “But now I’m less myself than I’ve ever been. I do things . . .” Her head lowered, as if she didn’t quite have the energy to hold it up any longer. “It’s like I’m a passenger in my own body. Since taking the Bile, sometimes it . . . controls me.”

The Bile.

It was like someone had taken a blindfold off of him that he didn’t know he was wearing.

The Bile, he thought with revulsion. *The magical cure-all Bile!*

Rollan touched the spot where she’d gripped his wrist, marks of her fingernails still raw and red there.

“But you fought it,” he said. The lines had flickered as she let go. “You can break the control. Just now, I saw you do it!”

She stared at him, a spark of hope in eyes otherwise empty of anything but despair. “I try. I really do. But it’s so hard.”

Rollan took his mother’s hand and pulled her up. “You never had help before. But you do now.”

A smile lit her face, and she leaned her face down to his until their foreheads touched.

“I love you, Rollan,” she said.

They stood this way until a bright flash in Rollan’s peripheral vision caught his attention. He tried to draw back, but found Aidana was holding so tightly he couldn’t fully disengage.

“Mother,” he started, and realized there was a whine in his voice that he had only ever heard from spoiled rich kids in carriages on the streets of Concorba. “You can let go now,” he said, and then saw her face was frozen in something that looked a lot like fear.

She was shaking. Her whole body had locked up, and she seemed to expend vast amounts of energy just to open her mouth in a whisper.

“Run,” she rasped, and as he watched, the pupils of her eyes enlarged, nearly overtaking her now-yellow irises. Her grip slackened, releasing him. He fell to the ground with the suddenness of it, and Essix flapped off his shoulder to avoid being toppled. Aidana was standing where she had been, frozen in place, slowly mouthing something he could not hear.

He stood, and Essix dropped back onto his shoulder. When she did so, he was almost blinded by the appearance of hundreds of streams of pulsing black light driving into his mother’s back. Her arm slithered slowly into her cloak. Wikerus materialized and immediately flapped up to hover above his mother’s head like a dark cloud.

“Mother!” he said. “You need to concentrate! You can —” he started, but was interrupted by her scream.

“Run!” she yelled and flung a knife at his face.

Essix seized Rollan’s hair in her talons and tugged just enough for the knife to sail past his ear, but by then Aidana was on him. Her fingernails raked across his cheek, and he felt something hard slam into his ribs. Essix screeched, and her beak drew back a chunk of meat from the soft flesh of Aidana’s hand.

Wikerus let out an enraged caw and took to the sky, Essix leaping to catch him in a clash of feathers. Rollan scrambled backward, gasping for breath. His mother advanced awkwardly, as if on borrowed legs, her hand dripping blood

onto the street. Her snake eyes stared without any hint of emotion, her mouth frozen in a terrifying grimace. Her voice gurgled from her throat like a thing trying to remember how to speak. Forward she lurched.

Rollan tried to speak to her, managing only a wheezed cough, but by then she had leaped atop him. Her knee landed in his stomach, knocking out his breath and bending him in half, vomit rising in his throat. Her hands clamped around his neck. He gasped for air that would not come and clawed weakly at her hands. He could feel hot wetness running down onto his chest, soaking his tunic. Whether it was his blood or Aidana's, he couldn't tell. Her teeth were bared, her mouth foaming like a rabid dog's. But even so, as the edges of his vision grew dark, he could see tears falling from those inhuman yellow eyes.

Rollan's arms grew heavy and his brain fogged. He began to wonder why he was struggling so hard. His fingers loosened from the hands around his throat and his eyes rolled to the side. The building he lay beside was made all of gray stone, except for a small, high window, which was of redbrick. The mix of the colors reminded Rollan of how old meat drains of blood. He closed his eyes to sleep.

And then, air. Beautiful, smoke-stained and dust-ridden air. He could breathe! His mother had let go and rolled off of him. She was thrashing on the ground, batting at the mass of talons and feathers clamped to her head. Her blows grew weaker, and under such an attack, her eyes would not last long.

"Essix, stop!" he tried to yell, but it came out a rasped whisper. Even so, the falcon let go of Aidana's face and took flight. Aidana's body collapsed to the ground, shuddering. Her eyes had survived, but the rest of her head and neck were covered in deep cuts and scratches. One wound below her jaw was bleeding profusely. Her cloak lay crumpled in a heap near his feet, and Rollan grabbed it and pressed the mass to her wound.

"You're going to be okay," he said. "Once the bleeding stops, you're going to be okay."

His breathing was too shallow and his speech was too fast. His hands were

shaking. A part of his brain knew he was in shock, knew he needed to stop and think, to figure out what he could do in a rational way, but nothing except what he was doing right now seemed possible, at least not until he felt the sharp prick of a knife's blade in his forearm.

Aidana was holding a throwing knife to his arm. Just holding it there. He pulled his arm back, and she dropped the knife, deliberately, onto the ground in front of him. Her mouth moved in silent words, her yellow eyes brightened from the color of tarnished brass to that of the heart of a flame.

“Rollan!” someone shouted. Meilin? He couldn't tell.

He leaned closer to his mother. He felt like he really needed to hear what she was trying to say.

Footsteps sounded behind him. “Rollan! Are you okay?” Conor. That was Conor.

He put his ear to Aidana's lips.

“Kill . . . me . . .” she whispered.

Rollan stumbled backward, slipped on the knife at his feet, and landed on his backside. She didn't stand, just shook violently, as if her every muscle was working hard to keep from attacking again. Her eyes flickered yellow, pupils dilating again, and her gaze darted to where the weapon lay.

“Can you run?” Conor was asking. “We need to go. I mean, really, really need to go.”

Rollan felt himself being pulled, first to his feet, and then away from his mother. Rollan stared at her as he went. He saw her eyes close, and he thought maybe that was it, that was the right thing to do, and he closed his too. His head felt light and wobbly, his body as distant as the sounds of battle. He tripped and fell, deciding that a nap right now made a lot of sense, except that someone was slapping his face. He opened his eyes and felt hands on either side of his face.

“Rollan! Rollan!”

Meilin. She was holding his face. That seemed sweet. She was right in front of him, her face in his. It was like a painting, a portrait of Meilin in front of a

furry black-and-white flag. No. Not a flag. Jhi. He looked up and their eyes connected. Some of the smoke in his brain cleared.

“Rollan! Look at me!” Meilin shouted. He blinked. She pointed toward the shore, where a boat was casting off amid burned timber. “That is a boat,” she said and turned his face back to hers. They were inches away from each other. He thought he liked that. “We need to get to that boat. Now.” And then she slapped him again.

He stood up and stumbled after her.

Rollan was vaguely aware of things flying past his head as he ran. Arrows? He was running down the pier behind Conor and Meilin, the only one not completely demolished by fire. A few people waved encouragingly from the boat. Something stung him in the calf, and he stumbled but kept going. He was running out of pier. He saw Conor, Briggan, Abeke, Maya, and Tarik in the boat. Meilin jumped in. She turned to look at him. He was at least four feet from the edge of the pier and the boat was four feet beyond that, and increasing. No way could he jump more than eight feet, not without the Granite Ram.

“Run!” someone yelled from the boat. Maybe several people.

Someone else shouted “Jump,” and so he did, realizing in mid-leap that the person who had shouted had been himself. He flew through the air, reaching out, but knowing he was too far to make it. As he braced himself for a plunge into the cold sea, something caught him. Something invisible. It felt like he was sitting on a cushion of air and was being drawn to the boat. He saw Meilin’s hands outstretched, palms upward, her face screwed up in concentration. The crystal talisman around her neck was glowing. She had caught him.

Rollan readied himself to tumble onto the boat when something knocked him from Meilin’s talisman-enhanced “hands,” slamming him into the ocean. Freezing water stung his nose. He gurgled and struggled, fighting his way to the surface.

He gasped for breath, and Tarik and Meilin were there, reaching in the water to pull him out. Their hands were on his wrists when a second attack knocked

the air out of him.

He went under again.

He clawed his way up, but the boat was moving away. Meilin reached out, yelling for him to “Swim, swim!”

He thrashed in the water and suddenly felt a tug upward. Meilin’s ghost grasp had hold of his shoulders and was pulling him out and toward the boat. He was nearly there when Wikerus sliced through the air at Meilin, grasping at the Crystal Polar Bear with his feet. Meilin screamed, and Rollan dropped back into the icy waters.

Essix dove down with a screech, talons out, going for the raven’s eyes. The raven let go of the talisman and flew away, but it had done its damage. The cord around Meilin’s neck was cut, and the Crystal Polar Bear slid from her neck and into the waters below.

Rollan dove, aiming himself at the sparkling crystal talisman as it fell. It didn’t occur to him that he was freezing. That he was so tired from running and fighting and bleeding that he was just seconds from passing out and making those icy waters his grave. In a burst of instinct he simply knew it was the right thing to do, and that he would be just as miserable and empty in the cold air as in the cold water, so he might as well do the right thing.

He could see the bear falling, still faintly aglow. Everything seemed to slow — the talisman, his kicking legs, his fading thoughts. He stretched his arm, trying to grab the talisman before it was gone, just managing to catch hold of it with numb fingers. He held the crystal bear to him, his energy gone, his goal achieved. He closed his eyes. Perhaps now he could sleep.

A tremendous force slammed into Rollan, rocking his mind awake enough to clamp down on lungs about to take a deep breath of ocean. He flailed and felt his hand break the surface of the water. His head followed, and he gasped for air. The fog in his brain cleared enough for him to realize his hands were empty. The talisman was gone.

He started to go under again when hands reached him. The boat had rowed

around, and Tarik and Meilin pulled him back in.

“No!” He coughed seawater, struggling to speak. “No, put me back! The talisman —”

“It’s too late,” said Tarik.

A huge, gray creature, like the Great Beast version of the horror dog of the Ardu, was swimming away from their boat. One of its elephantine tusks had hooked the Crystal Polar Bear. It swam to the far shore and leaped out of the water on its belly, offering the talisman to a man in a black hood. He took the talisman and held it up, showing it proudly to Shane and a couple dozen other Conquerors on the edge of the burned docks.

“No!” said Rollan. “No, no, no!”

He rose, trying to jump in after it, but Tarik held him fast.

“It’s done, Rollan!” said Tarik. “Don’t sacrifice your life for what’s already lost!”

Rollan struggled, his eyes on the shore. The Conquerors gloated over the Crystal Polar Bear that he and his friends had fought so hard for. The great gray, tusked beast stared back with a face as sharp as a spear. And Aidana — his mother — watched him with her dark eyes. Her face was covered in scratches, blood dripping off her chin, down her neck. She lifted her hand as if she would —

Shane approached Aidana, putting a kind arm around her shoulder, and her hand dropped. The two of them watched the boat recede, sadly, their shoulders stooped, their heads bowed.

Suddenly Rollan was shuddering with sobs he didn’t know had been building. He pushed his palms against his aching heart and sobbed.

Tarik’s arms were still around him — not holding him back now. Just holding him. Tarik patted his back, pressed Rollan’s head to his shoulder, not speaking.

When the sobs slowed, Rollan still kept his face hidden, afraid to see their faces, to know if his friends thought him weak, careless, foolish.

He wiped his face off with his scarf and sat down, Tarik sitting beside him.

“A walrus,” Rollan whispered. “Wouldn’t you know it’d be a walrus. I know for sure now. I *hate* walruses.”

The other kids laughed, the sound honest and nervous and full of pain.

“Rollan, are you okay?” Conor asked. “That woman. She almost killed you.”

Rollan just stared into the distance. So many things found and lost so quickly. He’d lost the talisman. He’d lost his mother — again. Had she wanted to come with him there at the end? But even if she did, she was under the Bile’s control. Oh, the Conquerors touted it as a cure-all, but forgot to mention how at any moment anyone who drank the Bile could become the Devourer’s puppet.

She said she’d gone back to that house in Concorba where she’d left him on the steps waiting for a miraculous family who never claimed him. She’d gone back for him. And he’d go back for her. Somehow. He *would* save her from the Bile’s control, if the only way was killing the Devourer with his own hands.

Rollan rubbed his face. He wasn’t crying anymore, but his eyes were hot and stinging.

“Something happened to you,” Tarik said. “Something more than losing the talisman.”

Rollan shook his head. He didn’t want to speak.

“All this struggle and hardship must feel overwhelming,” Tarik said. “I believe you have known more loss than I can imagine. Life is full of loss. I have learned that what matters is how we fill the hole that the loss leaves behind. The Devourer is a great hole. He tries to consume the world to fill his loss, but domination will not satisfy his hungering need for wholeness.”

Rollan saw Meilin put a hand over her face to hide her anguish. Rollan’s heart hurt even worse. Meilin would understand if he told her about Aidana. Conor too, he believed. Tarik would comfort him. Abeke would be silent but not judge him. With a start he realized he knew how they all would react. This was his crew now. This was beginning to be his family.

But he didn’t feel capable yet of telling the story. The pain was still as fresh as an arrow just entering his heart.

“Use what you have lost,” Tarik said. “Draw from it. Swing from that loss and each punch will have more power.”

Rollan nodded, but he didn't feel much like punching. He slumped to the boat's deck, sitting with his knees pulled to his chest. Between the legs of everyone else standing, he saw another figure huddled directly opposite him. Maya. He almost didn't recognize her with her red hair burned almost completely away, a pink wound across one cheek. The normally lively blue eyes were vacant. He couldn't tell if she was looking at him or not.

“The fire,” he whispered. “It was her.”

Conor dropped to one knee beside him. “She saved us. There were a hundred Conquerors, more maybe, each with a spirit animal. After Maya . . . blew up . . .” Conor paused, his eyes clouding with some memory Rollan did not have. “After that, a large part of their army was just gone.”

Rollan saw Abeke sit down next to Maya and take her hand, saying something to her as Maya continued to stare forward.

“A hundred or more . . .” Rollan pressed shut his eyes. “The Conquerors were serious about this.”

“And prepared enough to know we were coming,” Conor said. He was looking at Meilin, who was holding Jhi's paw in an affectionate way that Rollan had never seen her do before, as Jhi licked at a wound on Meilin's leg. Everyone looked pretty beat up. Burns, bloodstained clothes, horror still in their eyes. He lifted a hand to his neck, felt the tender bruises forming there, shaped like his mother's fingers.

Tears began to well up, and a part of him wondered if all that seawater he'd swallowed trying not to drown was streaming out of his eyes.

Maya's empty eyes found his. Maybe it would be better to be burned out from the inside, he thought. To be emptied of thought and feeling and be as alone on the inside as he was in the world. He closed his eyes. Numbness. The invitation was alluring, the promise of never feeling again. Death might feel as welcoming as a warm bed.

Jhi left Meilin and ambled over to Maya, who looked at the panda, a little hope in her eyes. Jhi pressed her forehead against Maya's, and the girl's eyelids flickered, closed. Her body collapsed into slumber, her face at peace.

But Rollan's limbs trembled, rejecting the lure of sleep and forgetfulness. Jhi looked at him with her peaceful silver eyes, and Rollan shook his head. Even though he chose to stay awake and ache with the memory of all that had happened, as if the pain would keep his mother alive and well, he didn't know how much more he could bear. His heart felt ripped to tatters, his body beat up and abandoned.

A sudden weight on his forearm, a prickly grip on his skin. Essix looked at him with an unblinking eye. He wasn't ready to tell the others, but Essix knew. She knew about Aidana and her raven, she knew how Rollan's heart had been ripped, half-mended, and then ripped again. She knew what he did, what he said, and of those things left unspoken — all the details of the broken mess of his whole self. And still she hadn't abandoned him.

The cold wind picked up, ruffling her brownish gold feathers.

Rollan loosened the neck of his coat, exposing the skin. He lifted his chin — an invitation.

Essix leaned in and became a mark over his heart.

Shannon Hale is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Goose Girl*, *Rapunzel's Revenge*, *Ever After High*, *Dangerous*, and Newbery Honor winner *Princess Academy*. Her past pets include rabbits, birds, dogs, cats, lizards, and a snake who broke the world record for longevity. Currently her pets include four small children. She can be found herding them with her husband, author Dean Hale, somewhere in Utah.

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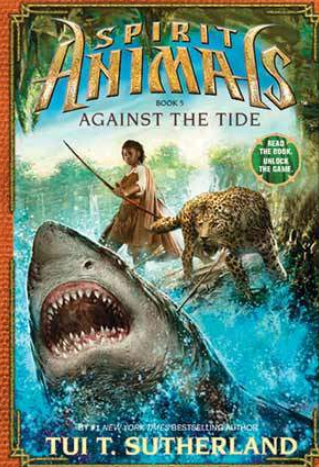
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Book Five

Against the Tide

By Tui T. Sutherland



THE PEOPLE OF STETRIOL CALLED IT MUTTERING ROCK.

They knew vaguely where it was, deep in the scorched, arid interior of the continent. They knew of the muttering sound that made the earth tremble for miles in all directions around it.

And they knew the name of the dark, sinister creature imprisoned there.

Most of all, they knew never to go anywhere near it if they wanted to survive.

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“Not much longer. Worthless humans. If I were free, we’d have all the talismans already. We’d be the kings of this world and everyone would bow to us.”

His colossal muscles rippled as he pushed against the cage walls. “Soon. My time is coming. They’ll come for me soon,” he muttered, squinting out at the small square of empty desert he could see. “Gerathon has been free for weeks. Slow, despicable humans. Perhaps I will rip off their toes.”

He lifted his head, his giant nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air. A slow, cunning smile spread across his face.

“Gerathon,” he rumbled. “At last.”

“I understand your eagerness to spill the blood of your enemies,” said a voice from behind him. “But after the centuries you’ve already waited, what does another month or two matter?”

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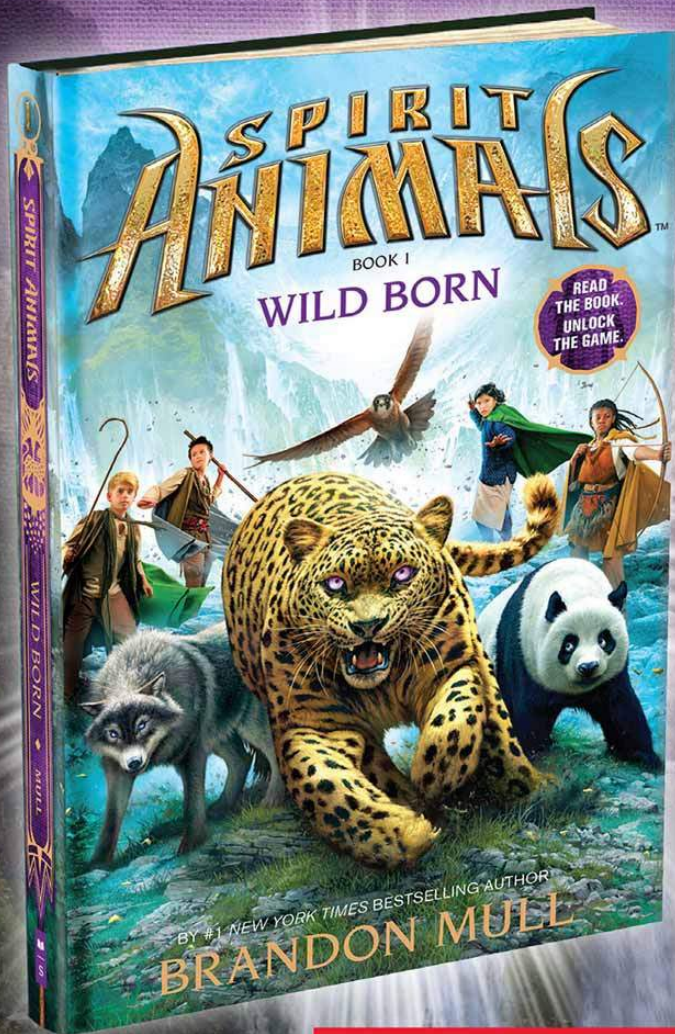
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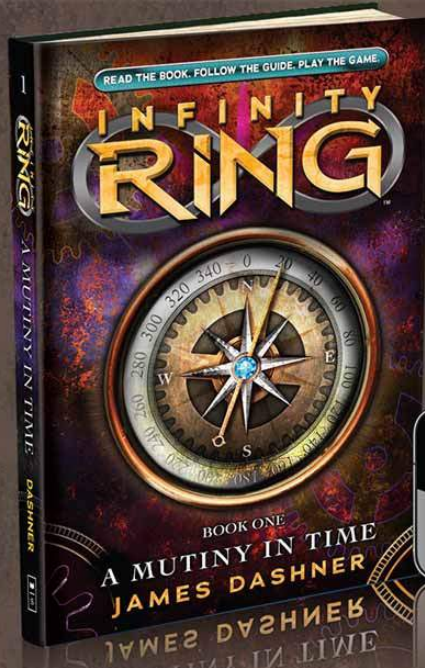
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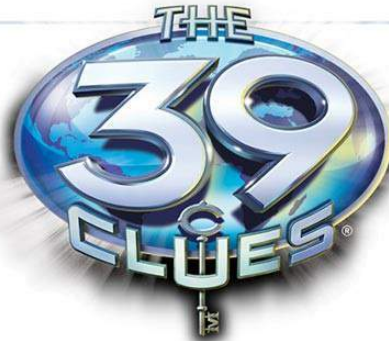


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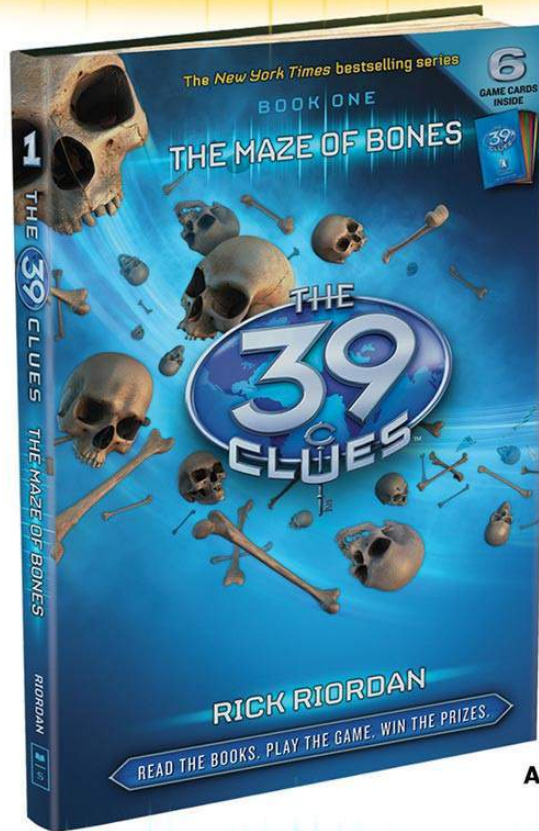
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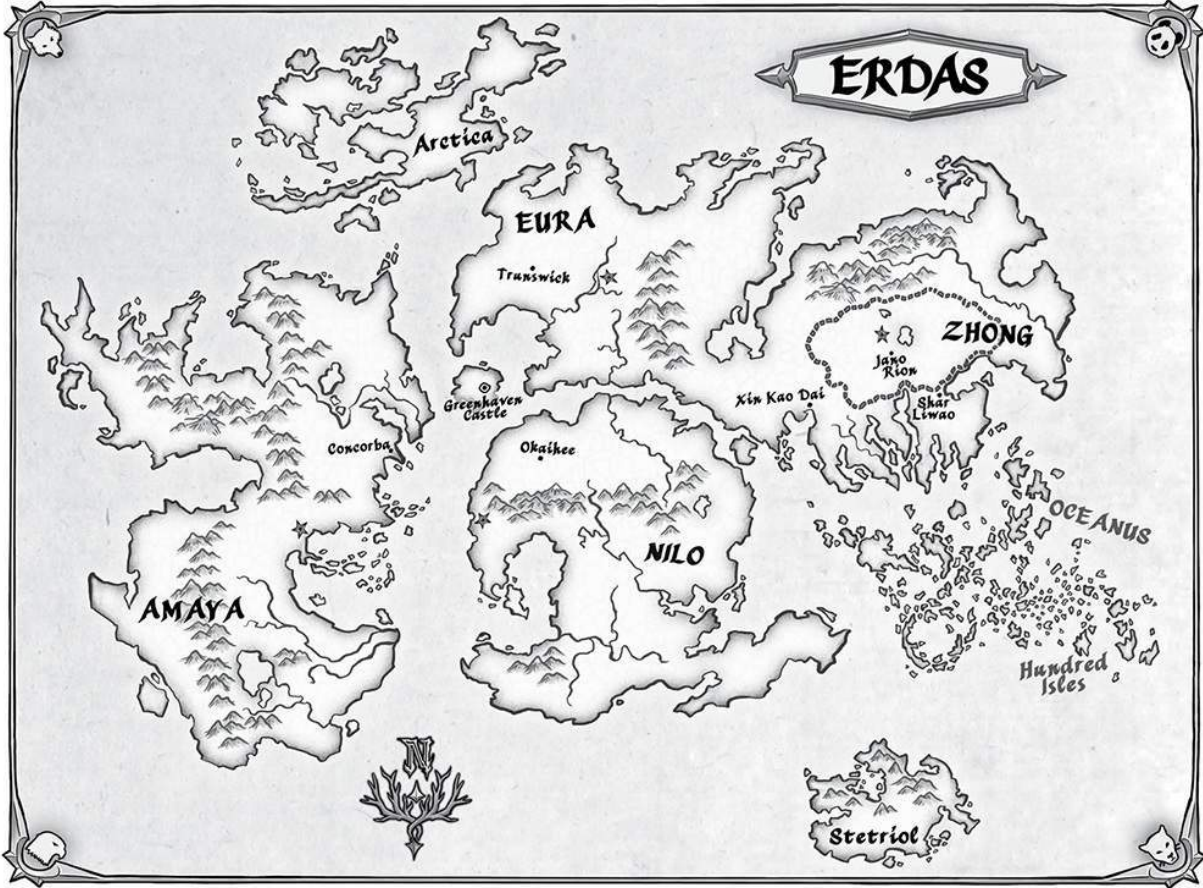
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For Elliot and Jonah, and for my spirit animal, Sunshine
— T.S.



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Greencloak Letter

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THE PEOPLE OF STETRIOL CALLED IT MUTTERING ROCK.

They knew vaguely where it was, deep in the scorched, arid interior of the continent. They knew of the muttering sound that made the earth tremble for miles in all directions around it.

And they knew the name of the dark, sinister creature imprisoned there.

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“And then . . . all of Erdas will be ours.”

AT SEA

*I*T'S SO CLOSE.

Abeke stared across the dark, rushing waves at the shore slipping past them. The afternoon sun was warm against her skin and cast bright golden sparkles along the ocean, but the wind was colder than it seemed like it should be.

Nilo. My home. My family.

All she could see of it was a strip of beach and thick green jungle beyond. This part of Nilo didn't look anything like the dry savannah around her village, but it was still as close to home as she had been in a long time.

I wonder what Soama would think if she could see me now. Or Father. Abeke rubbed the wound in her left shoulder where a Conqueror had buried a knife during their last battle. It had healed enough for her to use her bow again — a new bow, to replace the one shattered by a Conqueror's war hammer — but it still ached sometimes, especially when the air was chilly. Would my family be proud of me after all this? Or would they still think I'm a disgrace and a disappointment?

She tugged her green cloak closer around her shoulders and reached out, almost unconsciously, for her leopard.

“Rrrreowr,” Uraza grumbled, shoving her head under Abeke’s hand. The leopard sat for a moment, letting Abeke stroke her fur and glaring balefully at the ocean. Then she sprang up again and went back to pacing up and down the ship with long, rolling strides.

Maybe I’m only feeling out of sorts because she is, Abeke thought. Uraza, like most cats — giant or otherwise — strongly disliked water, particularly enormous bodies of water, and most particularly enormous bodies of water that surrounded her on all sides and smelled of fish she couldn’t catch herself.

“I know,” Abeke whispered, watching her spirit animal pace. “I wish we were back on land too.” It was hard to be cooped up on the ship for so long, but Tarik insisted that going all the way around Nilo was the safest route to Oceanus. The usual sea route — the passage between Nilo and Zhong — was sure to be swarming with Conquerors now.

Abeke was about to call Uraza back and offer her the choice of going into passive state, but right at that moment, Jhi the giant panda emerged from belowdecks directly into the leopard’s path.

Startled, Uraza leaped back and snarled, raising her hackles. Her teeth gleamed ferociously in the sunlight and her claws left gouges in the wooden boards of the deck.

“Uraza!” Abeke called.

Jhi blinked placidly at the leopard and then turned to amble away. But behind her was Meilin, who scowled at Uraza with one hand on the knife at her waist.

“She didn’t mean any harm,” Abeke said, hurrying up to them. She put a calming hand on Uraza’s back. “She’s just jumpy. We all are.”

“I wonder why,” Meilin said. Abeke knew what she meant, of course: another lost talisman, another pointless journey, and the little matter of Rollan’s news that someone was passing information to the enemy. Meilin looked hard at Abeke for a moment, then added, “Do us all a favor and learn to control your bad-tempered cat.”

Uraza hissed softly as Meilin stalked away.

“It’s all right,” Abeke whispered, stroking the leopard’s fur. “I understand why she’s worried.” *But I’m not the mole. I’m loyal to the Greencloaks. Yes, I like Shane and happen to think he’s not totally evil, but — I would never, never betray my friends.*

It wouldn’t be betraying them if I went home, though, would it?

For a moment she let herself follow that fantasy. She could sneak up onto the deck in the middle of the night, borrow one of the small rowboats, lower it over the side . . . and strike off for Nilo on her own, gone before anyone even noticed. She knew she could survive the trek back to her village, using her hunting skills and the bond with Uraza that made her swifter and stronger than ever.

Meilin would be relieved to find me gone. Rollan too, probably. And why should I stay with people who don’t trust me? She squinted up at the sun, thinking of Conor. She thought Conor would miss her . . . and she knew she would miss him. Back in Arctica, he’d said *being with you is like being with family*. Except that Abeke’s family usually made her feel uncomfortable and small and worthless, while being with Conor was easy and warm.

But she was still worried about them — her father and Soama. Her whole village, in fact. What if they needed her and Uraza to protect them?

Uraza growled under her fingertips, and Abeke wondered if the leopard had guessed her thoughts. “Oh, I won’t do it,” she said, crouching to talk to her spirit animal. “No need to make that bossy face at me. I’m not an idiot; I saw what happened when Conor and Meilin chose their families over our quest — and when Rollan nearly did. *I know the best way to protect Father and Soama is to find the talismans and stop the Devourer.*”

She sighed. *Besides, my family would probably be about as pleased to see me as Meilin usually is. “Oh, you’re back, are you? The Greencloaks didn’t want you either? Well, of course you failed. We knew that was going to happen. And don’t even think about bringing that leopard in here.”*

No, she was staying right where she was. She’d just have to find some other way to convince everyone to trust her.

Uraza let out a kind of “you better” grumble-purr. She nudged Abeke’s hand with her head again and then stalked gracefully away, lashing her tail. The wind sent ripples across her black-spotted golden fur.

“Everything all right?” Lenori said from behind her as Abeke stood up.

Abeke nodded. They’d stopped at Greenhaven only long enough to pick up Lenori and leave Maya — poor, devastated Maya. And then *Tellun’s Pride* had sailed, with Lenori’s visions driving them onward to Oceanus, where apparently a giant octopus really, really wanted a word with them.

“Couldn’t we —” she blurted out, and then stopped herself.

“Couldn’t we what?” Lenori asked gently.

“Couldn’t we stop in Nilo?” Abeke asked. “Isn’t there a Great Beast there? The lion, right? We could look for his talisman and then go to Oceanus, couldn’t we?” *And maybe we could stop by my village . . . just to make sure they’re all right.* She wondered if the rains had ever come. Or if the Conquerors had reached them first.

The Greencloak tipped her head sympathetically. “You miss your family. I understand; I miss mine too. And it’s so much harder for you — at least mine are in Amaya, where the enemy has not yet penetrated.”

“I don’t know if I so much *miss* them,” Abeke admitted. “But —”

“You’re worried about them.” The sea wind whipped through Lenori’s long dark hair, and her rainbow ibis stood close within the shelter of her green cloak.

Abeke turned to look at the tangled green coastline again. “I wish they knew what I was doing, that I’m not with Zerif anymore. I wish I could help them figure out who to trust and who not to trust. I wish — I just wish I could see them again and be sure they’re all right.”

The beads in Lenori’s bracelets clattered softly as the older woman touched Abeke’s shoulder. “I believe they are,” she said. “You are doing what must be done to save them. To save all of Erdas. You’ve been very brave.”

Abeke wished she had Lenori’s calm certainty about anything.

“I hope you will have a chance to see them again soon. But as for going to

Nilo right now, I'm afraid it's too dangerous," Lenori went on. "All reports indicate that the Conquerors have overrun the whole continent, the way they've taken over Zhong."

All the more reason to go now, Abeke thought. What about Father and Soama? What might the Conquerors have done to them? She imagined them forced to drink Bile, joined to twisted and horrible animals, and controlled by the enemy. A shudder ran through her whole body.

"And it's not just the Conquerors," Tarik added, strolling over from the stern. Abeke jumped; she hadn't realized he'd been listening. "Cabaro the Lion is one of the most deadly of the Great Beasts. Before we approach him, the more talismans we have, the safer we'll be."

"Besides, Mulop is calling us," Lenori said, her face clouded as if she were watching something a great distance away. She held out her hand and her ibis leaned in close to her, staring at Abeke with its unsettling eyes. The rushing spray of the ocean below them nearly drowned out Lenori's quiet, musical voice as she murmured, "I have heard him in my dreams every night for a few weeks now. It starts with the sound of whales singing, and then the darkness around me turns blue, and I realize I'm underwater. The light is drifting down from far above, but it barely illuminates the cavern where I'm floating. And then a bubble spirals up past me, and another, and I realize they each contain a word, so I start trying to catch them, but they all pop as soon as I touch them. Except the words are left in blurred ink marks on my skin, so I can almost see a pattern, a message linking them all together."

"Almost?" Abeke asked.

"Visions are always a little cryptic," Lenori said. "Visions from Mulop, even more so. But what I can figure out says that he wishes to see the Four Fallen and their companions." She shook her head. "We shouldn't keep him waiting any longer than we have already. You *don't* say no to Mulop."

I wasn't going to say no, Abeke thought. Just . . . right, sure, yes, be there soon, just give us a minute.

“Especially since this is the first Great Beast who’s reached out to us,” Tarik observed. He gave Abeke a wry, sympathetic smile. “After our experience with Suka, we could use a more pleasant encounter, don’t you agree? Somewhere with sunshine instead of frozen toes. Just imagine, a Great Beast who actually *wants* to see us. He may even be able to tell us more about what’s happening. All the tales agree that Mulop is a powerful seer.”

That all made sense, but Abeke had to admit she wasn’t entirely convinced by Lenori’s ambiguous vision. She heard footsteps on the deck and turned to see Rollan and Conor approaching. Briggan was in passive state — he was also not the greatest fan of sea travel — while Essix was aloft, soaring on the wind currents.

“This is the safest plan,” Tarik added reassuringly. And then he went on, much less reassuringly, “The only part that worries me is that we will have to sail past Stetriol. I wish there were another way, but I’m afraid we’ll just have to hope we can slip by unnoticed.”

“Oh, good, hoping,” Rollan commented. “That’s always worked out well for us.”

Tarik squinted at him.

“Don’t you dare ask me again if I’m all right,” Rollan said. He grinned in a way that was almost convincing, except that it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’ve dealt with it. I’ve moved on. I am totally fine. Better than fine — I am now someone who can summon his spirit animal to passive mode! That’s right, I’m awesome.” He pulled open his shirt and angled his chest at the sky. “Wait for it. . . . Wait for it. . . .”

There was a pause. Nothing happened. Essix kept circling languidly far overhead, ignoring them all.

“Still waiting,” Conor joked tentatively.

Rollan shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. We have an understanding now. We totally get each other. Right, Essix?” he called.

The falcon shrieked, which might have meant, “Oh, put your shirt back on,”

but was at least better than the nonresponses Rollan used to get from her.

Abeke wondered if Rollan really was fine. She didn't see how he could be, after what had happened with his mother, Aidana, but he clearly didn't want to talk about it.

There had been a grand total of one conversation on the topic, which was all Rollan would allow. Everyone had noticed how quiet and shattered he was after the battle on the docks, but at first Abeke had thought it was because of losing the Crystal Polar Bear. After all, he'd been the one holding it when the walrus stole it away.

But then, two nights later, as they sailed for Greenhaven, Rollan had told them the whole story. How his mother had abandoned him as a child because her bond with her spirit animal was unstable, making her too dangerous to be around him. How she'd found peace with the Conquerors when she drank Bile, and her bond became manageable. How she'd tried to convince Rollan to join her — and then revealed the dark side of the Bile: Whoever drank it wound up under the control of the Conquerors.

Someone else had taken over her body, Rollan said. Something inhuman had looked out of her eyes and forced Aidana to try to kill her own son.

Abeke still felt shudders of horror whenever she thought about it. She couldn't imagine what that would feel like, to see someone she cared about taken over by a dark force. Or worse, to *be* that person, losing all control over your own body. Imagine attacking your own family and not being able to stop yourself. Was there anything worse?

Poor Rollan. Nobody knew if he'd ever see his mother again, or if she could ever truly *be* his mother again, now that the Bile controlled her.

But he didn't want to dwell on it. That was the conclusion of his story: He said he wanted no long heartfelt chats about it, no pitying looks, no sad faces, or else he'd have Essix yell at them. What was done was done, and the truth was (he said) that he'd never really known his mother, so he doubted he'd miss her very much.

Abeke knew that was a lie, but it seemed to be a lie that Rollan needed to tell himself.

Ever since that night, he'd been acting like his old sarcastic self, with perhaps an extra note of swaggering now that Essix was finally willing to go into passive mode (occasionally).

Still, Abeke could tell that Tarik was worried about him. She thought they all were . . . but there was nothing they could do except give Rollan his space.

"Have you had any more visions?" Lenori asked Conor. "Has Mulop spoken to you?"

"Um," Conor said, "I wouldn't say *spoken*, exactly." He rubbed one hand through his blond hair, looking confused.

"I was just telling Abeke, visions from Mulop are always particularly strange," Lenori said, nodding. "What did you dream?"

"It started the same as the last one," Conor said. "I was floating in the air over a sea of islands — it looked like thousands of little green and white sheep scattered over the water. And then this dark cloud of ink started pouring into the water from the south, turning every island black as it touched them. And then —" He hesitated, glancing at Rollan.

"Go on," said Tarik. "He won't make fun of you."

"I absolutely will make fun of you," Rollan retorted. "But don't let that stop you."

"And then these long tentacles rose out of the ocean," Conor said, "and they started picking up the islands that were still green and throwing them at the black islands, knocking them back like a game of marbles. Which made the ink retreat too. And then the tentacles kind of pointed up at me, and then . . . they kind of waved. And then they went back under the water, and I woke up." He looked expectantly at Rollan.

"That's not fair," Rollan said. "That's barely hilarious at all."

"It doesn't give us a lot to go on," Lenori said, "but it's definitely Mulop trying to get our attention."



STORM

FEATHERS WERE SUDDENLY EVERYWHERE, SURROUNDING HIM, blocking out the sky and his friends and the air he had been breathing. Gray-and-white wings beat furiously at Conor's ears like blacksmith hammers trying to knock his brains out. An impossibly sharp beak jabbed at his face, at his vulnerable eyes, at his throat.

Conor let out a yell and stumbled back. The bird kept attacking, and he felt it painfully yank out several strands of his hair at once. He tried to cover his head, and the seagull instantly went for the pocket of his coat.

"The Granite Ram!" he heard Meilin yell, sounding very far away. "It's trying to steal one of our talismans!"

"It's a spirit animal!" Rollan shouted. "Working for the Conquerors!"

Conor could sense the others around him, trying to stop the gull, but it was relentless. He thrashed and rolled away, letting the bird pummel his back instead. Blows rained down on him. His hands clutched the stone ram in his pocket. He was *not* losing another talisman, not even if the seagull tried to peck out his eyes.

And then he heard a cry that he recognized as Essix's, and a moment later the seagull was suddenly gone from his back.

“Conor?” Abeke was beside him, crouching to check his face. “Are you all right?”

“Did it get the talisman?” Meilin demanded.

“No.” He shook his head. The weight of the ram was still heavy in his pocket.

“Essix!” Rollan shouted. “Be careful!”

Conor sat up and looked to the sky. His clothes were torn and he could feel blood rolling down his face from at least two seagull-inflicted wounds, but he was more worried about where the bird was now.

High above them, he could see Essix and the seagull diving and snapping at each other.

“Don’t let it get away,” he gasped. “If it’s a Bile-bonded creature, it could lead the Conquerors right to us.”

Abeke sprang to her feet and whipped out her bow. In a moment she had an arrow notched and aimed, but then she hesitated.

“Shoot it!” Meilin yelled.

“I don’t want to hit Essix!” Abeke shouted back.

Rollan cupped his hands around his mouth. “Essix!” he called. “Stop! Back off so we can shoot it!”

Essix screeched in response, but she dove and flapped away, leaving Abeke a clear shot.

Abeke fired the arrow, but it missed the seagull by a feather. Swiftly she drew and aimed again, but the second arrow was too late. The gull was already winging away into the clouds.

The falcon shrieked with what sounded like frustration, at least to Conor, who felt the same way. But he saw the look on Abeke’s face, so as he climbed to his feet, he patted her shoulder. “It was an impossible shot,” he said. “None of us could have made it either.” He looked at Meilin for confirmation, but she just narrowed her eyes and didn’t respond.

“But now the Conquerors will know where we are,” Abeke said, her voice cracking. “That seagull could lead them right to us.”

“They probably already know,” Meilin said unhelpfully. “Since someone is passing them information, as you might remember.”

“Meilin, it’s not me!” Abeke protested. “I’m not the mole. I promise you can trust me!”

“*How?*” Meilin exploded. “How can any of us trust anyone anymore?” She clenched her fists as if she was trying to hold in her anger. “I *want* to, by all the Great Beasts, of course I do; I hate feeling angry and suspicious all the time, especially with you — I mean, with any of you,” she added, but her gaze was fixed on Abeke. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are,” Abeke tried to interject. Conor wanted to jump in too, but he could see that Meilin was too upset to listen.

“But *someone* is the mole — someone has been leading the Conquerors straight to us over and over again,” Meilin barreled on. “And no one seems to care and no one wants to talk about it, so fine, but what are we supposed to think when your Conqueror boyfriend keeps showing up just in time to steal talismans from us? That last battle — you realize that was the second time you were conveniently captured so you could be used as leverage against us?”

“He’s not my boyfriend, and I would never ever do that on purpose,” Abeke cried. “Shane is different from the others! I know we could reason with him if we got him away from the rest of the Conquerors. I swear, I was only trying to help us escape alive, because even if you don’t believe it, Meilin, I really care about you. About all of you.”

Meilin’s shoulders dropped and she put her hands to her head, suddenly looking exhausted instead of confrontational. “I care about you too,” she muttered after a moment, barely audible. “But who else — and how — I can’t stop thinking about it. It’s someone here. It’s one of you, and it kills me —” She broke off, took a deep breath, and turned to Jhi. “Let’s go get Conor some bandages.” The two of them headed for the ladder that led below. Jhi walked close enough to brush Meilin’s arm with her fur, a worried expression on the giant panda’s face.

Abeke sighed.

Conor put his arm around her shoulder in a half hug. He knew how Meilin felt — every time he thought of Shane, he wanted to punch something, and he couldn't at all see what Abeke saw in him. But he knew what he himself saw in Abeke — courage, loyalty, and honor. He believed in her. He wasn't going to let any of the small voices of doubt reach into his brain and change that belief.

“Don't worry,” he said to Abeke. “Meilin just prefers to have problems she can beat and stab and kick, instead of ones that circle around quietly haunting us. You know that. She's angry, but she'll come around once we — uh, once we . . .”

He trailed off. Once they figured out who the real mole was? How could that information be anything but devastating to all of them?

“Thanks,” said Abeke, looking down at the rolling deck. “I think I need to — I'm just going below for a minute.” She hurried away, brushing at her eyes, with Uraza close on her heels.

Conor wished he could have said something to make her feel better. They'd all been through so much together since Abeke first left the Conquerors and joined the Greencloaks. It didn't seem fair that suddenly she was back in the same corner of distrust and suspicion where she'd started out.

Well, she isn't. Not with me, anyhow.

He touched the tattoo on his arm where Briggan was dormant. He hadn't had time to call his spirit animal for help when the gull attacked; he hadn't even had a chance to think. He reached inside, calling for him now, and Briggan responded immediately, appearing next to Conor on the deck. The wolf looked Conor up and down and shot a dangerous glance at the remaining seagulls — a look that said, “Seagulls for dinner would be all right with me, if anyone else wants to try a stunt like that again.”

Conor crouched and put an arm around Briggan, who started licking the wounds on Conor's face and hands.

After a moment, Conor shook himself, stood up, and headed over to Rollan and Tarik. The older Greencloak was leaning on the railing of the ship and

looking back at the clouds where the seagull had vanished. Briggan stuck close to Conor's side with an alert, vigilant expression on his face.

"Are you all right? That was creepy," Rollan added as Conor nodded. He looked up at the other seagulls, several of which were perched on the mast crossbeams or along the sides of the ship. "How can we know which animals are working for the Conquerors?"

"There's no way to know unless they look unusually large or if they do something odd," Tarik said. "Uraza must have noticed the way that one was studying Conor." He glanced down at Conor, and without saying a word, Conor handed the Granite Ram over to the older Greencloak. It seemed safer if Tarik held on to it.

"I'd say we can expect more of that kind of thing," Tarik said, pocketing the talisman. "It's only going to get more dangerous the closer we are to Stetriol. We could be watched at all times."

Conor shivered. "Maybe that's how the mole is getting his information. Maybe it's not one of us — maybe it's some animal that's been following us."

"Aha," Rollan said. "I knew that boll weevil in my soup last night looked suspicious."

Conor smiled halfheartedly. It was an unsettling thought, but not as unsettling as the idea that one of their friends and fellow Greencloaks was working for the enemy.

As if he'd read his mind, Rollan added, "I've been trying to use this intuition thing to read everyone since we left Eura. And I swear, I'm only getting sincerity from everyone, including Abeke. I don't sense any deception or betrayal . . . it's weird." He kicked the railing, looking down at his feet. "Or maybe I'm missing something, the way I missed that Pia was lying when she gave me the compass."

He fell silent, and Conor guessed he was thinking of the darkness he hadn't seen inside Aidana either, until it was too late.

"Don't blame yourself," Tarik said. "For all we know, there is no mole and the Devourer just wants us to suspect each other."

Rollan nodded, but Conor could see that he didn't really believe it. The message from his mother had been pretty clear — someone among them was passing messages to the Conquerors. Somehow they had known exactly where the Greencloaks would be with the Crystal Polar Bear. Somehow they *always* knew.

It didn't make any sense, though. Conor's mind kept circling the options, leaving him more and more puzzled and worried.

Meilin hated the Conquerors for what they'd done to her father and her home — she'd never work with them. Abeke might be friendly with Shane, but Conor trusted her; she wasn't the kind of person who betrayed her friends, and she believed in the Greencloaks' cause. Rollan . . . maybe someone might think it was suspicious that Rollan still refused to join the Greencloaks. But if he was on the Devourer's side, he would have gone off with his mother, or at least he would have known about her and the Bile. Conor was sure Rollan hadn't been faking the pain that came with the story he'd told them.

So if it definitely wasn't any of them, who else could it be? Tarik or Lenori? Tarik was their guardian, their rock. Conor believed he would die to protect them if he had to. There was no reason for him to betray them. He didn't know as much about Lenori — and it had occurred to him that if she could receive visions from a great distance, perhaps she could send messages the same way. But that didn't feel true to what he knew about her either.

None of them made sense as the mole. But there was no one else it could be.

"I'll see if the whales can go any faster," Tarik said, straightening. "We're only a day away from the channel between Nilo and Stetriol, the most dangerous point of our journey. We need to travel as swiftly as we can. That seagull was only a harbinger of what's yet to come."

Conor felt a shiver travel down his spine.

Watched on all sides. Dangerously close to Stetriol. And divided among themselves, each of them looking at the others and wondering who the mole could be.

He had a strong, sinking feeling that this mission was going to end with loss and disaster.



“Are there any talismans that control the weather?” Rollan moaned from his hammock. The wind whistled outside, and furious waves thumped against the boards of the ship. The lanterns shook and swayed, flinging shadows jerkily around the room. Across the cabin, Abeke lay in her hammock with her arms over her face, silent. All of their animals were in passive state, even Essix.

“No,” Meilin said from the floor, where she was calmly sharpening her knife. “Control the weather? Maybe a Great Beast could do that, but there’s no talisman that could give that kind of power to a human. Obviously.”

“Oh, sorry,” Rollan said. “I forgot the talismans can only do normal, logical things like make a wolf the size of a house.”

“Were you wondering if someone sent this storm to us?” Conor asked Rollan. He felt as green and seasick as the other boy looked. Their ship had been tossed and shaken and beaten and pummeled for days by hurricane-force winds and driving rain. At least they didn’t have to worry about sails, which would have been destroyed immediately. The two massive rockback whales who towed the ship kept them steady and as close to their course as they could.

And yet the storm had still forced them from their planned path. Two days ago, during one of the few hours of calm, Conor had caught a glimpse of land off to the south. He knew it had to be Stetriol: home of the Devourer, prison of Kovo and Gerathon. That was as close as Conor ever wanted to come to that dark place.

“No, but that’s a nice terrifying thought,” Rollan said, answering Conor’s question. He waved weakly at the dark portholes. “I just want to stop this rain already. You know, put on some albatross necklace and wave my fists at the clouds and poof, blue skies are back.”

“There is no albatross among the Great Beasts,” Meilin informed him.

“I *know*,” he said. “Well, okay, possibly *my* fancy tutors never got to that, but the point is, I was just being metaphysical.”

“Metaphorical,” she corrected. “Actually, neither of those words makes sense there.”

“Next time I throw up,” he threatened, “it’ll be into your soup bowl if you don’t stop taking advantage of my illness to kick me while I’m down.”

“Get anywhere near my soup bowl,” Meilin said sweetly, “and you’ll find out what getting kicked really feels like.”

Conor decided it was time to get some fresh air.

The rocking of the ship seemed calmer than it had been for days, and the sound of the rain on the outside walls was no longer a relentless drumbeat. Perhaps the storm was finally passing.

He rolled himself cautiously out of his hammock, taking a moment to steady his legs before stepping over Meilin and heading for the passageway and the ladder to the upper deck. The sounds of Rollan and Meilin arguing faded behind him as he climbed up into the gray morning air.

Conor was right. The rain had slowed to a drizzly patter and the wind only tousled his hair cheerfully, as if it hadn’t spent the last several days trying to hurl him bodily into the ocean. There were even glimpses of sky between the masses of gray clouds overhead, and up ahead he could see scattered sunbeams slanting down toward the distant islands.

Islands!

His heartbeat quickened and he dashed to the railing at the front of the ship.

He wasn’t dreaming. Those were definitely islands on the horizon — more than one. It had to be the Hundred Isles!

Conor flew back down to their cabin. “We’re here!” he cried excitedly. “The Hundred Isles! Come see!”

Rollan groaned mournfully, but Meilin sprang to her feet, and a moment later Abeke sat up to follow them.

As they reached the deck, Conor held out his arm and released Briggan. The

wolf shook himself and sniffed the damp air, then turned to nudge Conor's hand. Conor scratched behind Briggan's ears, grinning.

"Almost there," he said to the wolf.

"But *not* actually there," Meilin pointed out grumpily. She glowered at the distant islands. "Being able to see them is not the same thing as arriving. I thought you meant we'd be on land in a few minutes."

"It's a relief to see land at all, though," Abeke said with a sigh. She stretched her arms up to the sky. "And to be able to breathe out here without drowning."

Essix shrieked in agreement behind them as Rollan released her into the sky. The falcon soared between the masts and up until she was just a small scratch against the clouds. Rollan staggered to the railing beside Conor and took a deep breath.

"See?" Conor said to him. "Don't you feel better already?"

Rollan stared out at the gray-blue sea in front of them. "Not exactly," he said. "Not if those are what I think they are." He pointed at a few dots far ahead on the water; Conor hadn't even noticed them before.

"Show-off," Meilin said. She started tying her hair back. "All right, what do your falcon-enhanced eyes see?"

"Tarik!" Rollan shouted urgently, whipping around. "Tarik!"

Tarik and his otter, Lumeo, came bounding across the deck toward them. "What is it?"

Rollan pointed at the dots. "Ships. Conquerors, I'm sure of it."

Tarik took out a spyglass and studied the ocean for a long moment. "Blocking our path to the Hundred Isles," he said finally, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the telescope. "I should have expected this."

"Maybe that seagull . . ." Abeke started.

"They'd have been waiting for us regardless," Conor said. "They knew we'd have to come looking for Mulop eventually."

"We'll have to fight our way past them," Tarik said grimly.

"Oh, hooray," Rollan said, resting his elbows on the railing and dropping his

head into his hands.

Tarik strode off to warn the sailors, and soon the ship was bustling with activity as everyone prepared for a sea battle.

Until the time came to fight, there was nothing Conor and his friends could do except watch the ships coming closer and closer. It felt to Conor exactly like the time a fire had raged through his village, inexorably consuming everything in its path. He'd only been three years old, but it was one of his earliest memories, particularly that feeling of helpless dread . . . knowing something awful was coming for you, and that there was nothing you could do about it.

Conor twisted his staff in his hands and touched the ax at his belt. He wished he had a bow like Abeke's instead. His weapons would be most useful at close range — but if the Conquerors got close enough for that, they'd be on the ship, and that . . . would be very bad.

“Only six ships,” Meilin said. Her jaw was set and her eyes flashed as though she was assessing the distances, wind direction, and weaknesses of their attackers. “And our whales swim faster than they can sail. If we can just get past them, we should be able to escape into the islands.”

If . . . Conor thought. The odds were six to one, and it looked like the ships were swarming with warriors and animals. He remembered their last battle and how badly they'd been outnumbered. This time there was no Maya to set all their enemies on fire.

Abeke leaned precariously over the railing, peering down at the whales. “What are those?” she asked, pointing.

Conor felt a stab of fear go through him as he recognized the sharp triangular fins slicing through the water. “Sharks,” he said just as Abeke gasped with recognition too.

“It's all right,” Meilin said uneasily. “They can't hurt us as long as we don't go in the water.”

“Guess I'll postpone my usual morning swim, then,” Rollan said, but even his wisecracking sounded tense, and his eyes were worried as they all watched the

sharks draw closer and closer.

The creatures were huge, with cruel teeth big and scary enough to see all the way from the deck of the ship. Their unblinking eyes seemed to glare up at the Greencloaks. These were clearly Bile-enhanced sharks, hideously oversized after being forced to drink the evil liquid — and horribly dangerous.

But if they couldn't attack the people on the ship, then surely there was nothing to worry about. . . .

“The whales!” he cried, suddenly figuring out the plan. “They're going to hurt the whales!”

The first shark had already reached the long, mottled gray-and-black side of one of the rockback whales. Conor watched in horror as it attacked, ripping its fierce teeth into the innocent whale's flesh.

The rockback whale let out a cry of pain that echoed eerily, like a stone mountain calling out for help. Its partner called back, long and low and tragic, but there was nothing it could do to help. More sharks were already descending, at least six to each whale. Conor could see blood seeping from the first wounds. He knew the blood would attract even more sharks, regular ones. As vast as they were, the whales were not fighters, and they had no protection against the vicious predators. They couldn't even submerge and hide in the deep; if they went under, they'd drag the ship down with them.

“Can you shoot them?” he asked Abeke, turning to see that she already had her bow drawn. Uraza stood next to her, growling and lashing her tail.

Abeke bit her lip, concentrating, and then fired. The arrow plunged into the nearest shark and it writhed angrily for a moment before a second arrow skewered its eye. As it sank below the water, Conor felt a weird twinge of pity for it. It had been living its normal life as a normal shark until someone came along, captured it, and forced Bile down its throat to change it into an enormous, rage-filled monster. Then again, normal sharks weren't exactly pleasant either.

Abeke drew her bow again, but the sharks had all moved farther away, closer to the whales' heads, out of range. She fired anyway, but her arrow vanished

harmlessly into the sea.

She swore, brushing away tears, and reached for another arrow.

“Maybe you should save those for the Conquerors,” Conor said softly. He nodded at the ships that were now sailing into a blockade around them.

“But those poor whales,” Abeke said. “They don’t deserve this.”

He agreed with her. He felt sick at the sight of the majestic, gentle rockbacks under attack. But there was nothing he could do to protect them except fight off the enemy. Boats full of Conquerors and their animals were already rowing toward them. Grappling hooks shot onto the deck of *Tellun’s Pride*, slithering back to catch on the railings. Conor hefted his staff and turned to join Tarik and the other sailors.

“Meilin!” Rollan yelled suddenly from behind him. “What are you *doing*?”

Conor looked back and saw that Meilin had grabbed a spear from a nearby sailor and vaulted onto the railing at the bow of the ship. With a swift, graceful movement, she crouched — and vanished over the side.



SHARKS

SALT SPRAY PELTED MEILIN'S FACE AS SHE SWUNG FROM ONE of the ropes that connected the ship to the rockback whales. Dark water yawned far below her, eager to swallow her up if the sharks didn't get her first. She heaved her feet up to the rope and wrapped them around, and then she started pulling herself down toward the whales, hand over hand. The sharp edges of the rope cut into her palms in a million places, but she kept going, ignoring the shouts of her friends back on the ship.

Someone had to help the whales, and they certainly couldn't do it from up there.

The rope jounced and swung precariously as she dipped toward the restless ocean. Her heart skipped a beat as one of the shark fins sliced through the water right below her.

Nope. Don't even think about it. I refuse to be eaten by sharks.

Her shoulders were yelling with agony by the time she glanced down and finally saw the rocky slope of the whale's back below her. Taking a deep breath, she unhooked her legs and dropped into a crouch on top of the whale. The rope

continued past overhead, connecting with a kind of harness near the whale's mouth.

Nothing to panic about. It's like walking on a beach, she told herself. A beach strewn with rocks and boulders . . . which happened to be moving very quickly . . . and was incredibly wet and slippery underfoot . . . oh, and PS, also had *deadly sharks* snapping and lunging only a few feet away.

The whale beneath her let out another mournful bellow of pain. The vibrations echoed through Meilin's bones and made her heart ache. She placed her open hand on the whale's back, in a clear spot between the rocks.

"It's all right," she whispered. "I won't let them hurt you anymore."

Meilin rose, took a step, and immediately slipped, cracking her knee on one of the rocks jutting out of the whale's back. She let out a hiss of pain and then stood again, gritting her teeth. After a moment she figured out how to balance and how to grip the slick surface with her boots. She edged forward, pulling out the spear she'd strapped to her back.

She counted seven sharks around this whale, but it seemed like more from the way they thrashed and churned the water. Bloody froth splashed up the sides of the whale and across Meilin's boots. The wind yanked fiercely at her cloak and hair, still heavy with rain.

One of the sharks spotted Meilin and suddenly lunged up onto the whale, whipping its tail back and forth and smashing its teeth together only inches away from her legs. Meilin stumbled back but managed to stay upright. *Do not fall. Most importantly: Do not fall into the water.* She'd be ripped apart in seconds if that happened. *Definitely do not think about that.*

With a yell of anger, she lifted the spear and drove it into the shark's open mouth. A burst of energy flooded her as she did, and the point of the spear came stabbing out the top of the shark's head. It tried once to gnash its teeth again, then flopped sideways, dead.

Meilin yanked the spear free — it took a few tries; it was harder coming out than going in — and kicked the shark until its momentum carried it sliding down

the side of the whale into the ocean. It disappeared below the surface in a flurry of red bubbles.

Encouraged, she darted along the whale's back to the next shark, which had its teeth firmly embedded in the side of the whale and was thrashing as if trying to rip out as big a piece as possible. Meilin paused above it, and for one chilling moment the shark's eye stared right into hers. Then she plunged the spear straight through that eye with skillful accuracy.

The shark convulsed powerfully, nearly jerking Meilin right into the ocean. She fell forward and had to scramble with her legs and one hand to find a grip on the rocky whale, while clutching the spear with her other hand. For a long, awful moment, she thought she was going to be dragged into that seething mass of sharks, and she nearly let go of the spear.

But at last the shark stopped moving, and she was able to kick it off the spear point into the water.

The whale made another wounded sound and Meilin saw three sharks circle around and head straight toward her, faster than any animal should be able to swim. Their teeth gleamed sharply, even below the water.

She clambered back up to the middle of the whale's back and stood up again, facing the sharks with her spear held high. From here she could see all the spots where blood was pouring from twenty different wounds. The whale was slowing down. It was vast enough that one shark bite couldn't do too much damage — but this many injuries . . .

Reluctantly, she held out her arm, and a moment later, Jhi appeared beside her on the whale's back.

The panda's paws immediately slipped on the wet surface and she sprawled out like an ungainly puppy.

"Hruff!" she grunted, giving Meilin a startled look.

"I know," Meilin said. "We're on a whale. Sorry about that. Is there anything you can do to help it?" She pointed to the multiple injuries.

Jhi tried to stand up, scrabbled her paws frantically for a moment, and then

collapsed onto her back.

“Hruumf,” she observed at the sky.

“Well, see what you can do,” Meilin said impatiently. “And don’t fall in the water.”

She hurried away from the panda, heading for the next shark. She could feel Jhi’s energy filling her, slowing time down so that she could see every step to take and move faster than she could on her own. Filled with that dreamlike peace, she swung her spear at another shark and impaled it through the side, then flung it out into the water. A fourth shark lunged up onto the whale, snapping at her boots, and Meilin dispatched it swiftly.

The next shark saw her coming and dove, sinking its teeth into the whale underwater, too far down for Meilin to reach it with her spear. She stopped, frustrated, and saw the next closest shark do the same thing. There was a lot of whale underwater, and no way for her to get there to protect its vulnerable underbelly.

She looked back at Jhi. The panda was crouched low with her paws splayed out, braced against the biggest rocks she could find. Her head stretched toward the closest shark bite and her nose twitched helplessly. Her furry black-and-white rump stuck up in the air.

Meilin rolled her eyes and sighed. *Oh, Jhi. That’s what I get for bringing a panda to a shark fight. A leopard or a falcon could at least do some damage.* But she also, unexpectedly, felt a stab of sympathy for the giant panda. The top of a rockback whale was clearly no place for her, and yet Jhi was trying her best to do as Meilin had asked. But how could anyone heal the whales in a situation like this, even a Great Beast?

Beyond her, Meilin could see the *Tellun’s Pride* — and she could see the Conquerors swarming up its sides. On deck, Rollan and Tarik were each grappling with opponents who were bigger and burlier than they were, while Abeke leaned over the side, shooting at the ones still climbing aboard. *Where’s*

Conor? She finally spotted him, whacking his ax into one of the ropes the Conquerors were using to shimmy over the railing.

Maybe that's what we have to do, she realized, looking up at the whale's harness. *If we cut the whales free, they can submerge and escape the sharks.*

But if they did that, the ship would have no chance of escaping the Conquerors. The speed of the whales was their only advantage, if they could just break free and use it. Without the whales, they'd be dead in the water until they got the sails up . . . if they could even do that in the middle of a battle . . . and then they'd be as slow as the ships chasing them.

She looked down again at the sad, wounded whales. None of that mattered; cutting them free was what she had to do. She'd never be able to fight off all these sharks by herself, especially since she could see even more menacing fins slicing through the dark water now, drawn by all the blood.

Meilin swore and darted back toward Jhi. The panda blinked her soft silver eyes at Meilin, who held out her arm. Jhi glanced woefully at the whale's injuries and then vanished into the tattoo again.

Once I get back on ship, I can cut the whales free and then help fight off the Conquerors. Maybe with my help, we can drive them off, Meilin thought. She didn't really believe it.

She turned to find a spot where she could jump up to the ropes — and then she saw a girl in the water.

Meilin blinked, and the girl was gone.

What?

Surely that was impossible. A girl in the water, out here?

Then she saw her again — a flash of dark hair and brown arms, out beyond the sharks.

Is she swimming? Here? Now?

Did she need to be rescued?

The girl's head rose out of the water and Meilin realized that she was riding something — a dolphin — just as they submerged again.

Was she a Conqueror? A dolphin didn't seem like the kind of animal a Conqueror would choose to bond with, but maybe.

She squinted through the haze of sea spray and light rain until the girl came up again. Now Meilin could see that she was wearing a long green cloak woven from seaweed. The girl lifted both arms in the air and waved.

Is she waving at me?

Meilin raised her arm to wave back — and then she spotted movement on the closest islands.

It looked like almost a hundred people were suddenly hurrying down onto the beaches and launching long war canoes. The boats leaped into the water and flew toward the battling ships.

Oh! Meilin realized. *She was signaling them.* The native islanders were joining the fight — coming to help the Greencloaks, Meilin guessed. Well, she hoped.

She looked up at her friends struggling on the deck of the ship.

Would they reach the ship in time?

Would it be enough to save the whales?



KALANI

“**F** OOLISH STUPID CRAZY LUNATIC BRAINLESS —” ROLLAN yelled, swinging his shortsword furiously at the Conqueror or in front of him.

“What did you call me?!” the burly man bellowed, pausing his attack for a moment to glare down at Rollan.

“I’m not talking about you!” Rollan hollered, then kicked the man as hard as he could in the midsection — a move he’d learned on the streets, not in any Greencloak training session. With a muffled “Oof!” the man staggered backward and tumbled over the railing into the sea.

Rollan could barely feel the flash of triumph beneath all his worries. What was Meilin *thinking*? Running around on top of whales! In the middle of the ocean! Smack in the center of a deadly shark attack! She could be the most brilliant and graceful warrior Zhong had ever produced (he suspected she was), and that would *still* be the worst idea of all time.

He caught a glimpse of her far below, wielding a spear against a shark at least twice her size, before another Conqueror leaped onto the deck and sent a knockout punch flying toward his face.

Rollan ducked in the nick of time and stabbed his knife up into the man's bicep. At the same moment, Essix hurtled out of the sky and seized something off the attacker's shoulder. As she flew up again, Rollan realized it was a tarantula, writhing and flailing in the falcon's claws. The Conqueror's spirit animal, no doubt. Rollan shuddered. If those hairy legs had reached him . . .

"Thank you!" he shouted up at Essix. She sank her talons into the tarantula and flung it into the deep water below.

The Conqueror bellowed with rage and came for Rollan. His face was contorted with fury, and blood dripped down his arm.

Rollan tried to duck away again, but meaty hands knocked his knife to the deck, wrapped around his windpipe, and began to choke him.

As he gasped for breath, his mother's face flashed in his mind. But it wasn't really Aidana's face — not with those yellow, inhuman eyes, or the snarling expression. He remembered her fingers around his neck. He'd stared at the bruises in the mirror for weeks afterward.

That was the Bile, a voice yelled in his head. She was being controlled by something evil.

He saw a flash of green as Tarik whirled toward him. In a moment, the hands were gone from his neck; in another moment, the tarantula-less Conqueror was spiraling down toward the growing crowd of waiting sharks.

"Are you all right?" Tarik called.

Rollan nodded, not sure he could speak. He didn't think he'd even get to catch his breath before someone else attacked.

But then he heard shouts in another language. And splashes. And the thunk-thunk of arrows hitting the side of the ship — along with shrieks from Conquerors who were in the way of those arrows.

Tarik fought his way to the railing with Rollan right behind him.

"Who's that?" Rollan asked. Below them was a whole armada of war canoes, with brightly painted colors glowing warmly in the sunlight. Green-tattooed warriors grappled with Conquerors, preventing them from reaching the *Tellun's*

Pride. Others were visible in the water, riding dolphins or orcas, driving away the sharks.

Tarik grinned at him. “Reinforcements. Allies. A welcoming committee. Whatever you want to call them!”

They turned back to the fight with renewed vigor, and soon there were no Conquerors left on the deck of the ship. Down in the water, the rockback whales were moving again, as swiftly as they could, leaving the wreckage of the Conquerors’ blockade behind them. They also left a heart-wrenching trail of blood through the bright green and blue water, but a battalion of swimmers and sea creatures now surrounded and protected them from any more sharks, Bile-enhanced or otherwise.

Rollan kept his gaze on Meilin, who rode crouched on top of a rockback whale. Her dark hair flew back in the wind and her cloak whipped around her shoulders. Her pale hands rested lightly on the whale’s surface, as if she was taking its pulse. She didn’t look up at him or the others on the ship. All of her energy seemed to be focused on the whales.

The sun broke through the clouds as they reached the islands. They were guided into a peaceful lagoon with water as blue as Briggan’s eyes, sheltered by tall island cliffs on either side and deep enough for the whales to swim comfortably. As soon as the whales came to a stop, they were mobbed by islanders in smaller canoes, all carrying baskets of something green.

Rollan saw Meilin stand up. A moment later, Jhi appeared beside her, wobbling clumsily. Meilin gently put one hand on Jhi’s head and leaned in as if she was listening. Then she started pointing to the shark bites and barking orders at everyone swimming or paddling around the whales.

“Let’s go,” Tarik said, nudging Rollan.

One of the ship’s rowboats took them to shore. Rollan thought he had never been so happy to set foot on land before. The weeks of seasickness, the sudden battle, his worries about Meilin — all vanished in an instant as his boots touched solid ground. He even, for the first time in weeks, managed to push his mother’s

darkness out of his head. With a whoop, he did a cartwheel in the sand and fell over.

Abeke collapsed onto the beach beside him. Conor looked like he wanted to as well, but Briggan was leaping around him, yipping joyfully. With a grin, Conor picked up a stick and threw it. Briggan raced off after it, but got distracted halfway there by Lumeo the otter, who was jumping in the waves. The two spirit animals romped playfully around each other, scattering sand in all directions. Conor started laughing, and Tarik grinned down at him.

“What is that face?” Abeke said to Uraza. “I thought you’d be thrilled to be back on land.” The big leopard was sitting beside her, shaking one front paw and then the other. Uraza paused and gave Abeke a disapproving look. She twitched her whiskers and sniffed her paw again, then flicked it at Abeke. A shower of damp sand came off her fur.

“Oh,” Abeke said, patting her sympathetically. “It’s just sand. It’s not that bad, is it?”

Uraza turned up her nose, flicked her tail, and stalked off toward the jungle of dark green trees visible at the top of the beach.

“I hope the rockbacks are all right,” Lenori said, twisting her long hair into a braid as she stared out at the water. Her bare feet sank into the sand and the waves rippled over and around the hollows they left. “Every time I think I’ve seen the worst of what the Conquerors will do, some new horror surprises me. Those whales are innocent, gentle creatures, not even spirit animals. Such brutality . . . such cruelty . . .” She stopped and took a deep breath. Lines of pain were etched in her face, as if she’d suffered along with the whales.

“They will heal,” Tarik reassured her. “We’ll make sure of that. They may be gentle, but they are also strong.”

“I’d like to go out there and check on them,” Lenori said. “Ah, here comes a canoe now.” She waved.

Rollan pivoted to look out at the whales and saw the canoe that was approaching — a canoe with Meilin inside. It slid onto the beach with a

whooshing crunch sound.

“I can’t believe you!” he exploded at her before her feet had even touched the ground. “You are the most headstrong, stubborn, brainless person I’ve ever met!”

“Oh, really?” Meilin snapped back. “Then let me introduce you to this guy I know. His name is Rollan.” She strode past him, nodding at the others.

Lenori stopped her, murmured something that sounded like “thank you” in Meilin’s ear, and then hurried down to climb into the canoe. Her ibis stepped majestically in behind her and stood like a long, thin statue in the bow of the boat. Two rowers returned the canoe to the bustle of activity around the rockbacks.

“Will the whales be all right?” Abeke asked Meilin, scrambling to her feet.

“I think so,” Meilin said. “It seems like they’re in good hands.” She released Jhi, who gave a little jump when her paws touched the sand. The panda turned in a circle, looked thoughtful for a moment, then slowly lay down and started rolling on her back. Her huge paws flopped goofily from side to side. Meilin raised an eyebrow at her, but didn’t say anything.

“That was amazing, what you did,” Conor said to Meilin in an awestruck voice. “Those poor whales.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Rollan said. “She’s lucky she’s not shark chow right now.”

“You still could be shark chow if you like,” Meilin said, waving one hand at the ocean. “I bet I could throw you pretty far.”

“*One wrong step!*” he yelled. “And then you’d be all eaten by sharks and where would we be? What would we do without —” *What would I do if something happened to Meilin?* “Without — uh, without Jhi? Did you even think of how much danger she was in?”

Something that might possibly have been actual contrition flashed across Meilin’s face, but before she could respond, a splash from the sea distracted them all.

Rollan turned and saw a girl walking out of the waves. She was probably

about sixteen years old and very tall — taller than Tarik, even. Her long black hair was wet and woven in a braid down her back, and her brown eyes were large and serious. Green stone earrings pierced her earlobes and a silver piercing that looked a little like a fishhook glittered from one eyebrow.

On her right shoulder, a black dolphin tattoo stood out in a sea of green whorls and patterns; green tattoos covered her arms from shoulder to wrist and continued across her collarbone. But they weren't like Finn's tattoos, hiding his spirit animal. Her dolphin was the centerpiece that everything swirled around.

"Welcome to the Hundred Isles," she said, wringing seawater out of her braid. "I am Kalani." Two islanders ran up as Kalani took off her dripping green seaweed cloak; one took it from her with careful ceremony, while the other handed her a new, dry green cloak. It wasn't quite like Tarik's and Lenori's cloaks, though. This one appeared to be made out of hundreds of bright green feathers.

She settled it around her shoulders and held her hand out to shake Tarik's. "I am so sorry we did not come to your aid sooner. We try to stay out of the Conquerors' sight, and we weren't sure you were Greencloaks. Not until we saw you trying to rescue the rockback whales." Kalani smiled at Meilin. "In other parts of the world, creatures of the sea are not treated with the same compassion and respect as they are here. But your bravery and kindness toward the whales were clear as day. We knew you must have a great love for all animals if you would risk your life for them — and we knew that, whether you were Greencloaks or not, we had to help you."

"Ha-HA," Meilin said to Rollan, tossing her head. "Compassion and respect! So THERE."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Have some compassion and respect for my nerves next time," he muttered.

"We are in your debt," Tarik said to Kalani. "I'm not sure what would have happened if you hadn't come to our rescue." He tilted his head at her cloak. "We knew there were Greencloaks here, but there wasn't time to send a message that

we were coming — not one that we could trust wouldn't be intercepted, in any case.”

“Our isles are overrun by enemies at the moment,” Kalani said. “It often feels like venomous jellyfish tentacles are wrapping tighter and tighter around us. But Greencloaks survive, and we protect our corner of Erdas as best we can.”

The islander who had brought her cloak spoke up. “Queen Kalani will always keep us safe. She has the ferocity of her mother and the wisdom of her father, may the ocean watch over their souls.”

Tarik bowed, low and quickly, so Rollan guessed he was the only one who'd caught the look of surprise on their guardian's face. “Apologies, Your Majesty. I did not know . . . I had not heard that the former king and queen . . .”

“It was a night attack,” Kalani said, “only a few months ago.” She fingered one of the green feathers jutting out of her cloak, her face shadowed with grief. “My parents were killed and the Conquerors took my two older brothers, we assume to enslave them.” Her dark eyes flicked up and caught Rollan's, and he saw a hard warrior inside the dolphin girl. He could imagine her running a gang of her own on the streets of Concorba, if she'd been born into a life like his. To tell the truth, he could imagine her eventually running the whole city.

“For some reason, it did not occur to them to try to take me,” Kalani said, emphasizing the word *try*. “So now I am queen. And my plan is to show them they overlooked the most dangerous member of the family.” She held out her hands, and the way she moved her arms made it look as though her tattoos were rippling like water.

Rollan glanced sideways and saw the admiring look on Meilin's face. A warrior queen, driven to avenge her parents' death — that was Meilin's kind of person, all right. As long as Kalani and Meilin were on the Greencloaks' side, Rollan figured the Devourer had better watch out.

“You look like you've come a long way,” Kalani observed, studying each of them. “Much like ancient sea turtles after a lengthy journey. Why are you here?”

Rollan's first instinct was to lie, but he was distracted by the startling news

that he looked like an ancient sea turtle and didn't speak fast enough. In any case, his instinct was no match for Conor's, which was always to blurt out the truth.

"We're looking for Mulop." Conor peered out at the water, then back at the tall cliffs of the island, running one hand through his disheveled blond hair. "It's really important that we speak to him."

"You can't be serious. Nobody speaks to Mulop," Kalani said, raising her eyebrows. "Do you regularly converse with Great Beasts in your part of the world?"

"Not exactly," Conor said. "Well, 'regularly' would be overstating it, anyway."

She gave him a puzzled look. "We revere Mulop, but no one has seen him in probably hundreds of years. He may as well live in the darkest cavern of the deepest part of the ocean."

"May as well?" Rollan echoed. "Does that mean you know where he actually is?"

Kalani's face clouded and she sighed.

"There's only one person who knows how to find Mulop," she said. "That knowledge has been preserved and passed down, from wise man to wise woman to our present wise man. But he's . . . well, he's unusual."

"Unusual how?" Rollan asked. "Believe me, we've met with plenty of unusual so far. Rhinoceros riders, underground cities of ice, Conor in a skirt — don't get me started."

The green feathers on her cloak rippled as Kalani shook her head. "I can't promise anything, but I'll take you to him," she offered. "Let's see if he will help you."



6

TANGAROA

ABEKE SHIVERED AS SHE FOLLOWED KALANI THROUGH THE flourishing jungle. Trees crowded around them and vines hung with bright red flowers snaked down from the branches to suddenly wind around their feet on every other step. Strange birds shrieked and whistled in the trees. Once, a face peering through the leaves made her jump, before she realized it was just a monkey.

Even “just a monkey” could be working for the Conquerors, though, she thought nervously.

That wasn't the only thing making her anxious. This jungle reminded her of another island — far away, in the Gulf of Amaya, where she had stayed with Shane back before she'd joined the Greencloaks. *Before I knew what the Conquerors were really like.*

It was on an island just like this where she and Uraza had spied on a group of men testing out the Bile on innocent animals. She'd seen them turn an ordinary rat and a well-behaved dog into a pair of horrible monsters, oversized and violent and nasty. Here, in another overgrown, humid jungle, it was hard not to think of that gigantic dog chasing her, of that terrifying flight through trees very much like these ones.

Abeke felt Uraza's fur brushing her fingers and looked down to find the leopard padding close to her side. Maybe Uraza was reliving the same memories.

"It's really hot," Rollan complained.

"At least you're not wearing a cloak," Meilin said pointedly, and he fell silent. Rollan was still the only one of all of them who'd refused to accept the green mantle of the Greencloaks. Abeke wasn't sure what he was waiting for. He'd proven his loyalty. He could have gone with his mother back on the docks of that town in Northern Eura, but he'd stayed with them instead.

Kalani stopped and held up one hand. Everyone paused behind her, waiting. Abeke tilted her head and listened. A large blue butterfly with black spots drifted off a nearby tree and landed briefly in Kalani's hair, its color vibrant and bright against the dark strands.

"Ah ha ha ha!" a voice shouted somewhere up ahead of them. "That was a good one, Ngaio! I might never have looked there if you hadn't sneezed. My turn to hide!"

Kalani shook her head, sending the butterfly fluttering away, and started moving again. Abeke and Conor exchanged mystified glances. Beside Conor, Briggan had his nose to the ground, sniffing vigorously at the layers of rotting vegetation underfoot. Essix was somewhere high above them, hidden by the thick canopy of treetops, and Jhi ambled slowly at the back. Up by Kalani, Tarik had Lumeo curled around his shoulders, and he kept turning to make sure they were all still there.

They clambered over an enormous fallen tree with ridged bark that made perfect footholds. Something with way too many legs hissed at Abeke and scuttled away into the underbrush. Sweat rolled down her face and back. She almost missed the freezing wind and icy, insect-free snow of Arctica — but not really.

Kalani stopped again in a clearing. Abeke's hunter's eyes could tell that someone had been here recently, trampling light footprints in the fallen leaves. She touched Uraza's neck fur again and felt a surge of heightened awareness.

Now she could see the small broken leaf stems on the tree across from her, along with two spots on the trunk where trails of ants were detouring around squashed insects. Whoever had been here hadn't run off into the jungle. He'd gone *up*.

She tilted her head back, and this time the face looking back at her was no monkey. He grinned like a monkey and thumbed his nose at her, but that was unmistakably the face of an old man, perhaps sixty years old or more.

"Hoy, Kalani!" he called down. "You're ruining our game!"

There was a cry of glee off in the trees, followed by crashing sounds as something came swinging through the branches toward them. Long hairy arms covered in bright orange fur circled the man's neck, hugging him tight.

"See?" the old man said to Kalani half-accusingly, half-teasingly. "It's very hard to play hide-and-seek with a whole crowd of visitors staring up at your magnificent hiding spot."

"This is Tangaroa," Kalani said to Abeke and the others.

"And this is Ngaio," Tangaroa added proudly, jumping down to the ground. It was a fairly long distance, but he landed with a bounce. Abeke guessed that was a skill sharpened by his spirit animal.

Wrapped around his back was a large, beaming orangutan. A bright red hibiscus flower was tucked behind one of her ears. She waved and showed them all her teeth. Abeke was struck by how similar Tangaroa's and Ngaio's expressions were, as if they'd spent a whole lot of time together. Tangaroa's wispy white hair even stuck up in tufts much like Ngaio's fur.

"My friends need your help," Kalani said. "They're looking for Mulop."

"Mulop!" Tangaroa shouted. Ngaio leaped off his back and they both began capering madly around the clearing as if locusts were crawling all over them. "Mulop, Mulop, Mulop!" Tangaroa sang. Ngaio echoed him with grunts, and they both giggled hysterically.

Next to Abeke, Uraza growled. "Shh," Abeke whispered, smoothing the leopard's fur.

Tangaroa stopped suddenly and pointed straight at Abeke and Uraza. "That is

a leopard,” he said.

“Eeeeeee!” Ngaio shrieked in agreement.

“Yes,” Kalani said. “But not just any leopard — it’s Uraza, reborn.”

“I don’t care if it’s the Emperor of Zhong,” said Tangaroa. “We don’t like leopards.” He sat down abruptly and turned up his nose. Ngaio climbed into his lap, and Tangaroa absently began combing out her tangled fur with his fingers.

“I’m sorry,” Abeke said, not sure what she was apologizing for.

“You don’t have to apologize for your spirit animal,” Kalani said. “I think someone else here should be sorry for his rudeness, though.” She gave Tangaroa a hard stare. “Just because he lives on his own in the forest doesn’t mean he gets to have the manners of a disagreeable lobster.”

“Mulop,” Tangaroa mumbled into Ngaio’s ear. “Think he’ll be pleased to see them?”

Ngaio answered by baring her teeth at Uraza.

“Me neither,” said the old man.

“Yes, he will,” Conor said eagerly. “He sent us a dream message. He wants to see us — it’s really important that we find him.”

“The safety of Erdas depends on it,” Tarik added.

“Then why didn’t *he* tell you where he is?” Tangaroa asked shrewdly. He waved his hands, startling an orange-spotted lizard into darting under a rock. “HMMMMMM?”

“Probably because he expected you to help them,” Kalani said. “Instead of acting like an embarrassing mule-headed pig’s snout.”

Abeke squashed the giggles that were threatening to burst out of her.

“Ooo, good one,” Rollan murmured. “I should write that down.”

Tangaroa tapped his teeth, unfazed by the insult. “I *might* be able to do that. But would it be *wise*? Is that what a *wise* man would do? Would a *wise* man have anything to say to a leopard or anyone who travels with leopards? When trusted with a sacred knowledge of this sort, should one hand it out *willy-nilly*, so to speak, to anyone who happens to wear a green cloak? Assuming one remembers

said sacred knowledge, of course.” He tapped his head. “The old coconut may have a few cracks in it these days.”

Is he really that bothered by leopards? Abeke wondered. Will he refuse to help us just because Uraza is here?

“Do you know how to find him or not?” Meilin demanded.

“Of course I know,” said the old man. “More or less. That is, I know how to call the Kingray, who can take you to him.” He scratched the back of his head. “If I remember that right. It’s been a while. Nobody’s called on Mulop in many years. Ngaio! Quick, to our thinking positions!”

Ngaio leaped off his lap and somersaulted into a headstand. Tangaroa did the same, ending up with his wizened bare feet in the air. They both scrunched their faces into absurd expressions of deep thought.

There was a long pause.

“Maybe we should come back later,” Kalani said.

“There’s no time for that,” Meilin snapped. “Is this lunatic really the only person in all the Hundred Isles who can guide us to Mulop?”

“Meilin,” Tarik said with a note of reproof.

“Indeed I am,” said Tangaroa serenely, keeping his eyes closed.

Kalani tossed her braid back and looked down at Meilin. “This lunatic is nearly as old as a whale king. Show a little respect for your elders,” she said. She crouched beside Tangaroa’s upside-down head. “Grandfather. For the safety of the Hundred Isles and all our people, and indeed for the protection of Erdas itself, I’m afraid I must order you to help these Greencloaks.”

“*Grandfather?*” Conor whispered.

“Whoops,” Rollan said with a smirk, elbowing Meilin in the ribs. She shot him a glare.

Tangaroa and his orangutan sprang to their feet and swept their arms out in matching bows toward Kalani. Abeke thought they looked rather like giant, ridiculous birds.

“Your wish is my command,” he said, “as my granddaughter and as my

queen. Ah, but wait! Mulop is revered by all the tribes. He is the sacred and beloved Great Beast for all of Oceanus. Shouldn't I respect his aura of mystery? His love of privacy? Besides, *how* do I know we can trust these alleged Greencloaks?"

Ngaio lifted her arms and gave them all a look that said: "Well? How can he? What can anyone do, I mean, right?"

Kalani rubbed her forehead, looking as if she would rather negotiate with fire ants than continue this conversation.

"Ask us anything," Abeke jumped in. "We only want to protect Erdas, and to do that we need to see Mulop. We're the good guys, I promise. Let us prove it to you, however you want."

"Ah, the young friend of leopards speaks," Tangaroa said. The orangutan scampered around to put the old man between herself and Uraza. She squinted at the leopard from behind his back.

"Well, that's one thing," Conor interjected. "The Four Fallen came to us — surely that means we're on the side of the good Great Beasts, right?"

"Maaaaaaaybe," said Tangaroa. "Ngaio and I are not entirely convinced that leopards *can* be good, however. All of the ones we've met tend to look down their noses at us, as if they think the only thing orangutans are good for is eating."

Another growl rumbled in Uraza's throat, as if she was inclined to agree with that last statement. Abeke hurriedly stepped forward.

"Uraza would never eat Ngaio," she said. "And we aren't, uh, looking down at you. Not at all. Orangutans are —" *Oh, ack.* She didn't know anything about orangutans. "Uh, really . . . really great."

Tangaroa suddenly clapped his hands together. A flock of tiny yellow parrots bolted from a nearby tree into the sky. "I know! I know what would be fun! Great fun!"

Abeke could tell that Meilin was ready to stab something. *Fun* was not something any of them had time for, not with the future of Erdas at stake.

“What is it?” Abeke asked, keeping her voice as calm as she could.

“A test!” said the old man. “A chance to show off your skills and your bond with your spirit animal. If leopard girl can defeat my orangutan in a race, I’ll tell you how to find Mulop.”

Abeke looked at the furry orange ape. With Uraza’s help, she could outrun an orangutan, couldn’t she? And then perhaps she could prove to the others that she wasn’t the mole — that she really was on their side.

“If that’s what it takes,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Kalani said. “Grandfather, this is asking too much.”

“Nothing is too much to ask for the honor of seeing Mulop,” he retorted. “Leopard girl, there is a tree about a half mile that way, which was hit by lightning three days ago. Race Ngaio there and back, and whoever returns first — whoever touches this great boulder here first — shall be the winner.”

“Wait,” Tarik said, stepping forward. “I am their protector. Let me run in her place.”

“No,” said Tangaroa. “It must be the leopard girl.” Ngaio slapped her hands together, grinning.

“I can do this,” Abeke said to Tarik. “Really, I can.”

He looked down at her with a serious expression. “I believe that,” he said. “It’s just a heavy burden to place on you, and if I can lighten it in any way . . . I wish I could, that’s all.”

“It’s all right,” she said, feeling the warmth of his caring like a small sun. Tarik protected them because it was his task, assigned by Olvan, but he also clearly worried about them and liked them too, and that was an even better sort of protection. Abeke couldn’t help thinking that it would have been nice if her father had ever shown that kind of concern for her, instead of always worrying that she would shame their family.

“I can hold your cloak for you,” Tarik offered, adding wryly, “Seems like the least I can do.”

Abeke unhooked her cloak and handed him her bow and quiver as well.

“Good luck,” he said, and behind him she saw Conor nodding too.

She knelt down so she could be face-to-face with Uraza. “Help me,” she murmured to the leopard. Instantly a flood of power surged through her. She felt stronger, faster, and more attuned to the jungle. She could hear insects burrowing and branches creaking as parrots hopped through the treetops. She could smell the burned tree that was the marker for the race.

She stood up again. “Let’s go.”

They lined up beside each other. Ngaio stretched out her long arms and cracked her knuckles, then shook them out, flashing Abeke another grin.

Tangaroa bounced on the balls of his feet, clapping happily. “Racers ready?” he cried. “Be swift! Be sure! Be orangutans! GO!”

Abeke launched herself into a full-out sprint, leaping over creeping vines and mossy boulders as she tore through the jungle. For a moment she couldn’t see Ngaio on either side of her, but her relief was cut short when she spotted the orangutan swinging rapidly through the trees up above. The spirit animal was already in the lead.

Cursing softly, Abeke tried to push her legs harder. It already felt as if the wind was lifting her, as if she flowed through the jungle swifter than a shadow. How could the orangutan be faster than her?

She called to Uraza with her mind and put on another burst of speed. She didn’t dare look up again — her eyes were focused on the treacherous terrain ahead — but she thought she might have passed Ngaio, at least for now.

A rushing sound caught her attention from up ahead. Abeke smelled water and frogs, and before she’d cleared the trees, she knew.

A torrential river swept through the forest, right in her path.

Abeke skidded to a stop, looking frantically along the banks for a way across. *Not fair!* she thought. *Tangaroa knew this would slow me down.*

But not Ngaio. The orangutan flew by overhead, swinging effortlessly from vine to vine in the trees that reached over the river. Abeke could hear her

laughter echoing through the leaves. In fact, Abeke was pretty sure there was a whole audience of monkeys up there laughing at her.

If she can get across that way, I can too.

Abeke bolted toward the nearest tree and scrambled up the trunk. It wasn't as easy as climbing a tree with the Granite Ram had been, but soon she was balancing on a branch high in the air, surveying the vines ahead of her. She needed to do this the smart way. She *had* to win this race — they needed that information.

Also, she was pretty sure she'd spotted at least one crocodile in the river down there. So her plan was to not fall in. Definitely no falling into the crocodile-infested river.

Abeke grabbed a vine, backed up, ran along the branch, and leaped into the air. The river rushed by below her boots, furiously pounding the rocks. At the end of her swing, she let go and grabbed for the next vine. For a terrifying moment, her hands fumbled with empty space, and then she felt them connect around the vine and her momentum hurled her forward again.

One more vine, one more heart-stopping unsupported leap through space — and then Abeke was swinging over land again. She was too high to let go and fall, though, so she flung herself at the closest branch. Her torso slammed into it, nearly knocking the breath out of her, and she clutched at the bark with her hands. She could feel herself slipping — sliding — and then her fingers caught on a knot in the wood and she hung there, her feet dangling over a fifteen-foot drop.

With a heave, Abeke kicked herself up until she was straddling the branch. She didn't have time to catch her breath. Ngaio was already much too far ahead. She might even be on her way back already.

I have to do that again on the return trip, Abeke realized, her heart dropping. She glanced out at the river and decided to worry about that when she had to.

Gathering her feet under her, she reached for the trunk of the tree.

And that's when she heard the noise.

It sounded like . . . it sounded like a little child crying.

Abeke scanned the jungle floor. *Where is it coming from?* She shook her head. She really, *really* didn't have time to stop and look for it.

But it sounded so sad, a kind of wordless, hiccupping cry of loneliness. The little yowls were relatively quiet, not a full-throated wail, as if the weeper had given up on anyone coming to help but still couldn't hold back the grief.

Wait. Abeke turned her head, tapping into her spirit animal senses to enhance her hearing.

The sound is coming from somewhere up here — somewhere in this tree, I think.

She knew the race was more important than anything. But she *couldn't* turn away from something that needed help.

She clambered around the trunk and spotted a kind of nest on a branch a short way over her head. As she climbed up to it, Abeke could see how large it was, made of branches and moss.

And sitting inside the nest, all alone, was a sobbing baby orangutan.

Little tufts of orange fur stuck up all over its head, and its tiny, humanlike feet were pressed together. The orangutan's face was buried in small dark hands. Its shoulders shook as it cried.

"Oh!" Abeke cried, her heart flooding with pity. At her gasp, the baby looked up and its huge, mournful brown eyes met hers. The race flew out of her head and she opened her arms toward it.

The baby stumbled over to her and wrapped its long arms around her neck, burying its face in her shoulder with a whimper. Its golden orange fur was soft and warm as it rested its whole weight trustingly against her, as if it would never let go. It reminded Abeke a little of Kunaya, the kitten she'd rescued on their trip to find Rumfuss.

She hugged it and whispered soothing nothings.

Now what do I do?

She couldn't possibly win the race with a baby orangutan clinging to her. But

she couldn't abandon it here either. Tapping into her heightened senses from her bond with Uraza, she could both see and smell that no other orangutan had been here in days. Whatever had happened to its mother, this baby was all alone.

“Poor little guy,” she murmured, stroking the baby's back. “It's all right. You're safe with me.” She cuddled it closer and it squeaked pathetically.

Abeke heard rustling in the leaves and looked up.

Ngaio was in the next tree, staring down at Abeke and the baby orangutan.

THE CONCHES

CONOR SLAPPED THE SIDE OF HIS NECK.

“Too late,” Rollan said. Conor felt the welt of the insect bite already rising under his fingers. He rubbed it, feeling itchy all over. The air buzzed, and tiny wings seemed to flicker across his skin whenever he stood still, but it was also too hot to keep moving.

Rollan swatted at one of the buzzing insects. “Tarik, please tell me they don’t have the Sunset Death here.” Conor touched the mosquito bite again with a shudder. He remembered all too clearly how ill Rollan had been in Zhong.

“I’ve seen it once or twice,” Kalani answered before Tarik could. “It’s rare, but we have banana gourd seeds in my village to cure it if we need to.”

“That’s good to know,” Rollan said, “although I’d really prefer not to revisit the brink of death at all, if possible.” He waved his arms even more vigorously and Meilin gave him a sharp stop-fooling-around glare.

“Shouldn’t they be back by now?” she demanded. Meilin hadn’t stopped pacing around the clearing since the moment Abeke had raced off. Neither had Uraza. If he hadn’t been so worried, Conor would have thought it was sort of funny, how similar they looked.

Tangaroa shrugged pacifically from the top of the boulder that marked the end of the race, where he was perched with his legs folded under him. Conor wished he could even pretend to be that calm. His skin prickled and sweat kept dripping into his eyes. Briggan came back from sniffing the undergrowth, licked Conor's hand, and sat down on his foot.

"You think she can do it, don't you?" Conor whispered to him.

Briggan gave him a thoughtful blue-eyed stare, which was not terribly reassuring.

Across the clearing, Uraza's head snapped up. She stared off into the trees where Abeke had disappeared. Her tail flicked menacingly. Tarik stepped over to stand beside her, snapping a small stick between his hands in an absentminded, worried way as he squinted at the jungle.

"They're coming," Tangaroa said. He unfolded himself from the rock and gazed up into the trees with a puzzled expression. "They're *both* coming. Ngaio?" he called.

But instead of swinging out of the trees, Ngaio emerged on the ground, walking side by side with Abeke. Curled in Abeke's arms was a small bundle of orange fur with a sweet, curious face. It sat up and peered at the gathering of people and animals in the clearing, and Conor realized it was a baby orangutan.

They reached the edge of the clearing and Ngaio stopped. She looked up at Abeke and indicated the boulder with one of her large, dark, humanlike hands.

"Ngaio, what are you doing?" Tangaroa asked. "Are you letting the leopard girl win?"

Abeke crossed to the boulder and put one hand on it, keeping the other one around the baby orangutan. She turned to Tangaroa. "My name is Abeke, not leopard girl," she said. "Now tell us how to find Mulop."

Tangaroa tugged on his lower lip. Ngaio ambled over to him and gently thwacked his arm, then waved at the baby Abeke was holding.

"I see," said the old man. "Very well, if that's what Ngaio wants."

"Yes!" Rollan yelled, throwing his fists in the air.

“Nice work, Abeke,” Conor said. He felt like leaping around the clearing, but he didn’t want to let on how worried he’d been.

“I knew you could do it,” Tarik said, handing her cloak back to her with a grin.

“Kind of a weird way to win,” Meilin huffed. Rollan and Conor both gave her a look, and she rolled her eyes. “I mean, yay, that’s great.”

Kalani crossed to Abeke and stroked the baby orangutan’s head. “Cute,” she said. “Almost as cute as a sea horse.” The baby grabbed her hand and inspected each finger, then hopped down to the ground and started circling each stranger in turn.

“I was thinking we could call him Leopard,” Abeke said, raising her eyebrows at Tangaroa.

“Ho ho! Ha ha ha!” Tangaroa threw his head back and bellowed with laughter. “I like it!”

Conor crouched to get level with Leopard, and the baby delightedly patted his face, squashed his nose, tugged on his hair, and finished by giving him a hug.

“Awww,” Conor said, chuckling.

“You big softie,” Rollan observed, but he clearly couldn’t help grinning at the little ape himself. Lumeo crept down from Tarik’s shoulder and sniffed at the baby. The otter and the orangutan circled each other for a moment, and then suddenly Leopard leaped forward, Lumeo took off, and they began chasing each other playfully around the clearing.

“Ahem,” Meilin said, putting her hands on her hips. She turned to Tangaroa. “You said something about a Kingray.”

“Yes,” he replied. “The Kingray can take you to Mulop — that’s the only way to get there. You have to summon him by blowing two sacred conches together on Dagger Point.”

Briggan yelped suddenly and whirled around to find the baby orangutan hanging from his tail. He spun in a circle and shook himself until Leopard tumbled off, then paced over to sniff at the baby.

Leopard seized his ears and promptly climbed on his head.

The wolf gave Conor a why-am-I-putting-up-with-this? look.

“Oh, you love it,” Conor teased. Briggan was trying very hard to look dignified, but it would be hard for anyone, even a Great Beast, to maintain his dignity while wearing a bouncing orange hat.

“And where do we get these sacred conches?” Abeke asked Tangaroa.

“That is the tricky part,” he admitted. “The white conch is hidden on Nightshade Island.”

Kalani gasped and her hand flew to her mouth. “Grandfather! I can’t believe you just said that!” she said in a low voice, glancing around as if the trees themselves might be listening.

“What? What’s wrong with Nightshade Island?” Tarik asked.

“Let me guess,” Rollan said. “Something evil.”

“You can’t go there,” she said. “No one can. It’s *tapu* — sacred, dangerous, and forbidden. We can’t even speak of it.” She shook her head again, her long braid flying behind her. “I . . . cannot help you.”

“But if we went there without your help — ?” Conor guessed. “Maybe that would be okay?”

“Don’t tell me about it,” she insisted. “Don’t even speak of it anymore. Grandfather, where is the black conch?”

“It’s on Sunlight Island,” Tangaroa said to Kalani. She winced.

“Sunlight Island! That doesn’t sound so bad,” Rollan said. “Oooh, I volunteer to go there.”

“You’re right, it wasn’t bad at all — before the Conquerors came and made their base there,” Kalani said. She touched her dolphin tattoo, her eyes downcast. “Now it’s overrun with Conquerors, all of whom seem to have spirit animals somehow, and most of the animals there are creepy and monstrous. To give you an idea, my people have started calling it Monster Island.”

“Fantastic,” Rollan muttered. “I hereby unvolunteer.”

“The Conquerors are using the Bile to force new spirit animal bonds,” Tarik

told Kalani. “That’s why so many of them have companions — but they’re not really companions, as the Bile bond turns the animals into slaves instead. They’ve also discovered that feeding the Bile to animals will make them larger, angrier, and more dangerous.”

“By all the oceans,” Kalani said with alarm. She touched the dolphin tattoo on her arm. “Forcing the spirit bond — that’s horrible. And it explains a lot. I couldn’t understand where so many Marked would have come from, or why they were all willing to help the Devourer attack my people.” She frowned. “I wonder . . . one of my brothers didn’t have a spirit animal . . . but I doubt he’d accept a bond that was unnatural.”

Conor thought she didn’t sound all that sure.

From his new perch on Briggan’s head, the baby orangutan scanned them all and spotted Jhi for the first time. The giant panda was sitting in a patch of dappled sunlight with her front paws between her back paws, looking sleepy.

“Qrrrrr?” Leopard chirped at Ngaio, pointing at Jhi.

Ngaio spread her arms, as though she was saying, “I have no idea what that is either.”

Leopard took a flying leap off Briggan’s head and galloped over to Jhi. Before the panda could do more than blink in surprise, the little orangutan was clambering up her fur and inspecting her face with enthusiastic curiosity. Leopard poked the dark patches around Jhi’s silver eyes a few times, then opened the panda’s mouth and peeked inside.

Jhi let out an amused grunt and scooped the baby up in her paws. With Leopard hollering indignantly, Jhi set him on her shoulder and stood up to her full height.

“Ooooooorp,” said the baby orangutan, clapping gleefully. He pointed down at everyone and chattered something imperious.

“I say we split up,” Meilin said, ignoring Leopard’s antics. “Two of us go to this Sunlight Island to find the black conch, while the other two —” She glanced

at Kalani, who shook her head and pressed her fingers to her mouth. “While the other two do . . . something else. Something that doesn’t involve Kalani.”

“I can take you to Sunlight Island, but you’ll need stealth to get past the Conquerors,” Kalani pointed out.

“Then I say Abeke should do it,” said Conor. “With Uraza’s power, she should be perfect for that.” Abeke smiled gratefully at him. “I’ll go with her,” he added. “If that’s all right.”

“Sure,” Rollan said. “Meilin and I can go get the white OW!” he shouted as Meilin kicked him in the shin. He hopped away, scowling at her. “What was that for?”

Meilin jerked her head at Kalani, who had her hands over her ears. “She can’t even hear about it, remember?” she whispered.

Rollan stomped off into the trees, muttering grumpily.

“You’re right,” Tarik said to Meilin, “but let’s try a less physical way of making your point next time, if it’s not too much trouble.” He turned and bowed slightly to Kalani and Tangaroa. “Thank you for your help,” he said. “Kalani, if you’re willing to go with Abeke and Conor, I’ll accompany Rollan and Meilin.” She nodded.

“And then we’ll meet you at Dagger Point once you have the conch,” Meilin said to Conor. “Jhi, for the love of Mulop, would you stop rolling around like a drunk chimpanzee? Let’s go.”

The giant panda, who had been wrestling playfully with the baby orangutan, paused with a guilty expression and set the baby down. Leopard lifted up his arms and shrieked, demanding more play. Jhi shook her head, patted him gently, and followed Meilin and Tarik along Rollan’s path into the jungle.

Leopard scampered back across the clearing and climbed into Abeke’s arms again.

“I’m sorry, little guy,” she said, giving him a hug. “I have to go too. But Ngaio will take good care of you — right?”

Ngaio nodded and reached out so the baby could clamber onto her back.

Tangaroa smiled and wagged his head.

“I wish you luck, leopard girl,” he said. “And you, wolf boy. Remember, Mulop is great and inscrutable, so be respectful and listen carefully. Also, wear something warm. It’ll be a wetter sea voyage there than you’re used to.”

Conor felt like he could see for the first time why Tangaroa was called a “wise man.” As if sensing Conor’s thought, Tangaroa grinned impishly and jumped up to swing himself into the tree branches.

“Your turn to hide, Ngaio!” the old man called, and in a moment, the orangutans and Tangaroa had all vanished into the leaves.

NIGHTSHADE ISLAND

NIGHT HAD FALLEN. GLITTERING STARS STRETCHED ACROSS the dark southern sky in constellations that Meilin had studied in books, but had never seen before. She wished her father were here to see them too. He'd traveled all across Zhong, but she didn't think he'd ever been to Oceanus.

And now he never will.

Meilin wrapped her hand around the hilt of the sword in her belt, taking comfort from the weight of the weapon. She pushed aside the memories of her father and focused on the moonlit beach before them, lined with canoes that had been pulled up onto the sand. The smoky smell of fires rose from the village in the distance, and orange torches flickered as the islanders prepared for sleep.

"I still don't get it," Rollan hissed. "The people here like us. They saved us from the bad guys, right? They did stuff to heal the whales. So why can't we just ask them for a canoe?"

"Since when did *you* develop a problem with stealing?" Meilin asked him.

"I have my honor," Rollan said haughtily. "I only steal — I mean, stole — from people who deserved it."

"Meaning people who had stuff you wanted?" Meilin guessed.

“No,” Rollan said sharply, surprising Meilin with his seriousness. “Meaning people who’d rather throw a meal away than give it to a starving orphan.” He sighed and waved his hands at the murmuring village. “But they would help us. I bet you anything they’d be all, ‘Hey, sure, of course, take six canoes if you like, and here’s some strong cheerful friends to help paddle them for you too.’ ”

“Aha,” Meilin said. “The truth comes out. You just don’t want to row one of those things all by ourselves.”

“I am *trying* to do the *ethically responsible* thing here,” he insisted.

“That’s what we are doing,” Tarik cut in. He’d been studying the canoes as well, turning a small whittling knife between his hands. His dark green cloak blended into the shadows. Lumeo was coiled around his shoulders, breathing gently as if asleep.

Meilin was sure she and Rollan could get the conch by themselves . . . but she was still relieved that Tarik had decided to come along.

“Wait, what?” Rollan asked Tarik. “Stealing a canoe is the right thing to do?”

“We are protecting the islanders,” Tarik said to him. “*Tapu* is a very powerful thing. If anyone knew where we were going — if anyone spoke of this island to us — if someone helped us get there even just by giving us a canoe — then they would be marked as *tapu* as well. They could be exiled; at the very least, they would have to be cleansed.”

“Sounds like you’re not talking about a bath,” Rollan observed.

“The cleansing ceremony is sacred and secret,” Tarik said. “I don’t know anything about it. But we are not subjecting any of these good people to the guilt and anxiety and social ostracism that comes when you associate yourself with anything *tapu*. Better to steal a canoe and go without anyone knowing about it.”

“And besides, we’ll bring it back tomorrow,” Meilin said.

Tarik shook his head, a stirring of shadows in the bushes. “We can’t. Once it touches that island, the canoe will be *tapu* as well. We’ll have to destroy it for them, and pay for it some other way.”

“Huh,” Rollan said. “Doesn’t that mean *we’ll* be *tapu* as well, if we go there?”

So if we're trying to follow their rules as much as possible, then no one should talk to us either?"

Tarik thought about that for a long moment. "You're right," he admitted.

"Whoa," Meilin said to Rollan. "Bet you've never heard *that* before. Are you okay? I'm sure this comes as a bit of a shock."

"Ha ha ha," Rollan retorted brilliantly.

"I'll think about that," Tarik said. "Thank you, Rollan, it's a good point."

Rollan subsided, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"Oh, dear," Meilin said. "I'm not sure his head is going to fit in the canoe anymore."

Rollan snorted with amusement, but Tarik was quiet, looking toward the lights of the village. After a moment, he sighed heavily. "This quest is leaving a lot of burned bridges in our wake. I fear we, and perhaps all Greencloaks by extension, will no longer be so welcome afterward in places like this."

"And the Ice City, and Samis," Meilin said, guessing where his thoughts had gone. By waking Suka the Polar Bear in Arctica, they had destroyed the Ardu's frozen city. And she guessed that Suka's pond in Samis no longer gave everlasting life to anyone who drank from it. That was sure to have earned them a great deal of enmity.

"We do what we must," Tarik said. "As long as we save Erdas — and as long as you all are safe — that's what's important." He clapped Rollan on the back. "It's quiet enough now. Let's take that one."

Tarik pointed at the smallest canoe, then darted out across the beach toward it. Meilin and Rollan followed, their boots slipping and sinking into the soft sand.

Tarik knelt and sliced through the rope that tied the canoe to the others on the beach. Meilin took the end closest to the water and heaved it toward the ocean. She was surprised at how light it was.

Waves rushed up over her feet with a hurrying, swishing sound, like hundreds of warriors marching far away. The water tugged at her legs as it whooshed

back, and she had to catch her balance before she climbed into the canoe.

The boat rocked lightly as Tarik jumped in at the back, and then again, violently, nearly tipping over as Rollan dragged himself onboard as well. Tarik reached forward and caught Rollan's arm, helping him up.

And then they were away, paddling as quietly as they could through the starry night. Meilin glanced down at the dark ocean and tried not to think of slavering shark jaws coming right at her.

"Do we know where we're going?" Rollan asked once the island was out of sight. "Because I'm guessing we can't ask anyone for directions."

"Nightshade Island was erased from the maps of Erdas after the last war," Tarik said.

"So . . . no," Rollan answered himself.

"Which means we need a little help," Tarik said. "Perhaps from someone with extremely sharp eyesight who can fly?" Meilin felt the canoe rock as he poked Rollan with his foot.

"Oh, you mean my very agreeable spirit animal," Rollan said. "Right, that's definitely going to work." But he held up his arm and looked at the sky hopefully.

Meilin touched the panda tattoo on her own arm, wishing Jhi could do something to help.

With a flutter of wings, Essix descended and settled on the side of the canoe. In the bright moonlight, her feathers looked silver and black. Her sharp talons curled around the wood and she tilted her head at Rollan.

"We need your help," Rollan said. "We're, uh — we're looking for an island."

Essix shifted her gaze to Tarik. If she'd had eyebrows, Meilin guessed her expression would have been priceless.

"I know, I know," Rollan said. "There's a hundred to choose from, ha ha ha. But we're looking for a specific one — Nightshade Island."

The falcon let out a shriek that nearly blasted out Meilin's eardrums. The

bird's feathers all ruffled up around her neck, she glared at Rollan as if he'd suggested something even worse than a return trip to Arctica.

"Ow," Rollan protested, rubbing his ears. "What's the matter with you? You know this place?"

Essix shrieked again and shuffled over to jab at Rollan's knee with her wickedly hooked beak.

"OW!" Rollan yelled. "Tarik, a little help? Why is she so mad?"

"Rumor has it that something dark happened on Nightshade Island during the last war," Tarik said thoughtfully. "Maybe Essix knows what it was. Maybe she was there. Or maybe she only knows it's a bad place." He stopped paddling and reached up to pat Lumeo. "I hope we're not making a grave mistake, going there."

Essix let out another bloodcurdling shriek.

"Yes, all right, we know what *you* think," Rollan grumbled. "Can you lead us there anyway?" He paused, then added, "Please?"

"Essix, it's the only way we'll get to see Mulop," Meilin chimed in. "We need his talisman if we're going to stop the Devourer. So we have to go to Nightshade Island to find the white conch, no matter how dangerous it is."

The falcon clacked her beak several times as if annoyed. Abruptly she lifted into the air and soared ahead of them, veering northeast.

"Hmm. I don't know if that's a 'yes' or a 'go eat worms,'" Rollan admitted.

"So we follow her," Meilin said, "and we just have to hope she's taking us to the island, right?"

Tarik didn't answer, but he steered the canoe in the direction Essix had gone. They all paddled silently after the falcon.



Meilin was usually excellent at keeping track of time. She could make herself wake up at sunrise; she could calculate in her head the minutes it would take to do any task. Even with all the traveling they'd been doing lately, she was still

usually quite certain when it was time for the night to be over and the sun to be up.

And right now the answer was: at least two hours ago.

She set the paddle carefully across the canoe in front of her and rubbed her eyes. Why was it still so dark? Yes, she could tell they were surrounded by a thick fog, but even so, it should have gotten a little bit lighter once it was morning. But the water was blacker than ever, the moon and stars blotted out by the rolling murkiness around them. When she twisted around, she could barely see Rollan, sitting in the middle of the canoe only a few feet behind her. Beyond him, Tarik was a lump of darkness.

Meilin wished there was space in the canoe to release Jhi. She could really use some heightened senses right about now.

Up ahead, they heard the screeching call of the falcon again. They hadn't seen her in hours; they were just trying to follow the sound of her voice.

Tarik adjusted the direction of the canoe and spoke quietly. "I know, Meilin. Something's wrong. Lumeo can feel it too."

"Maybe we should go back," Rollan suggested.

"I'm not sure we can," Tarik said. "I suspect we've been paddling in circles for a while; I have no idea which way is out or back. I'm not even sure we're really hearing Essix anymore. My guess is that this island really doesn't want to be found."

A dozen paper-thin spiders seemed to be scuttling down Meilin's spine; she shivered and felt for her sword hilt again. What kind of place could magically repel visitors? Where did this fog come from?

"On the plus side," she said, "that probably means we're close. Right?"

"Essix!" Rollan suddenly shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. "ESSIX! Come back!" His voice faded into the clouds that surrounded them, absorbed like ink marks on wet paper.

There was no response, no answering screech or flurry of wingbeats. They waited in silence for a long moment.

“Where is she?” Rollan asked. “ESSIX! What do you mean, we weren’t really hearing her? What have we been hearing — and what happened to Essix? And why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

“I wasn’t sure,” Tarik said. “I’m still not sure. But I think the fog is playing tricks on us.”

Meilin leaned back and put a reassuring hand on Rollan’s knee. “I’m sure Essix is all right. Probably better off than we are. She’s smart and resourceful and tough, remember? I bet she’s in the sunshine somewhere, eating a lizard and thinking we’re all idiots for not having found her yet.”

Rollan didn’t say anything, but after a moment, she felt his fingers twine around hers. It was comforting, how large and warm his hands were. Like leaning into a furry, solid panda.

They sat like that for a minute, holding hands while the boat drifted. Tarik had stopped paddling as well and seemed to be listening.

“Do either of you hear that?” he whispered.

“What?” Rollan whispered back; Meilin just tilted her head and concentrated.

A soft whooshing sound echoed somewhere nearby . . . in and out, in and out . . . like armies on the move.

“Waves breaking on shore,” said Meilin. She listened for a moment longer, then pointed. “That way.”

Tarik wordlessly turned the canoe, and they paddled with new energy.

Meilin still couldn’t see anything but billowing fog when she heard sand crunching under the bottom of the boat. She leaned over and jabbed her paddle into what turned out to be solid land.

“We’ve hit a beach, I think,” she said. Cautiously she stepped out of the canoe and edged forward. The sand under her sloped up out of the water. For a moment, the fog cleared just a little, and she saw a beach of black sand, studded with broken shells that looked like shards of bone.

Maybe that’s what they are. Who knows what horrible thing happened here — maybe a terrible battle.

There was no doubt in her mind that this was Nightshade Island. The weight of something evil hunkered over the whole place. If the word *tapu* hadn't already existed, Meilin thought someone would have invented it just to describe this island. Dangerous and forbidden — a place no one should ever go, or touch, or even speak of.

We definitely shouldn't be here.

But we have no choice.

She grabbed the front of the canoe and dragged it up on the sand; Rollan and Tarik jumped out to help her. They carried it as far from the water as they could. None of them were sure if it was high tide or low tide at the moment, or what that meant on this island, but they didn't want to risk the possibility of waves coming in and carrying off their only way out of here.

As soon as the canoe was secure, with a few large rocks piled around it to anchor it into the sand, Meilin held out her arm and released Jhi.

The panda stood beside her for a long moment, staring around at the fog. Slowly she sat down and gave Meilin a troubled look. Her silver eyes gleamed and her giant paws left deep indentations in the black sand.

And yet, it almost seemed like she wasn't there at all. Meilin could *see* her, but the usual waves of serenity and strength that came with the panda's appearance were missing. Meilin hadn't quite realized how strong their connection was until she couldn't feel it, and now it was like one of her senses was missing.

"Jhi?" she said softly, holding out her hand.

The panda pressed her nose into Meilin's fingers, but even that didn't help. It still seemed like a ghost was standing in front of her, even though it was a ghost with fur that she could touch.

"Is everything all right?" Rollan asked.

Meilin shook her head. She could tell that Jhi didn't want to be here either, the same way Essix had resisted. She had a feeling Jhi knew exactly what terrible thing had happened here. But the panda would still help her; it was

muffled, but Meilin could still feel something, a kind of sense of direction. The vortex of the evil or the magic or the disruption, whatever had happened here, seemed to be at the center of the island. She let go of Jhi and strode ahead of the others, heading for the interior of the island.

As they moved farther inland, the black sand turned into a pebbly stretch of jagged black rocks. The sharp edges dug into the bottom of Meilin's boots. It was hard to travel in a straight line, with ankle-turning crevices lurking everywhere underfoot.

After a minute, she felt Rollan's hand brush against hers and their fingers intertwined again. In the misty gloom, he felt like an anchor to the real world, even more real than Jhi. Like all the rest of her might drift away, but her hand would still be there, safely wrapped in his.

It was a little weird if she thought about it, and a little weird that she liked it, and a little weird to think about Rollan at all when she needed to focus on finding the white conch and getting out of here. She wished she could think of something sharp and teasing to say that would make everything feel normal again. But none of them seemed to feel like talking; it was as though the air was too heavy for speech.

A huge, gnarled shape loomed suddenly in front of them, and Meilin jumped back, her free hand grabbing for her sword.

"It's a tree," Rollan whispered. He paused, then made the effort to add, "But I bet you can still defeat it. Just glare at it for a minute. Yeah, like that." He managed a grin, and she felt herself smiling back.

"It's already dead," Tarik said, walking around the tree. He touched it lightly with one hand. "It feels petrified. Like stone. What could have done this?"

Meilin ran her fingers along the smooth, cold bark. Tarik was right. It felt like a statue. A statue of a tree that had been blasted by lightning, or something worse.

"Whoa," Rollan said under his breath, squeezing Meilin's hand. She turned and saw more shapes through the fog — more petrified trees, all of them twisted

and knotted, pale and bent.

Something moved on one of the branches.

Meilin had her knife out in a heartbeat, ready to throw, and realized in the nick of time that the something was Essix.

“Essix!” Rollan yelled, letting go of Meilin and running forward.

The falcon turned her head slowly and looked at him with vast disinterest.

“You’re all right.” Rollan leaned against the tree where Essix was perched. “I couldn’t feel you at all.” The falcon didn’t move. “Essix?” He turned to Tarik. “I still can’t — I mean, it’s like she’s barely there at all. Barely *here*.” He touched his chest.

“It’s the island,” Meilin said. “Even Jhi — it’s like she’s behind glass.” She found Jhi beside her and ran her hand over the panda’s soft black ears.

“This place is affecting our spirit animal bonds,” Tarik said, sounding wretched. He held Lumeo gently in his hands, but the otter was gazing almost blankly out at the fog. Meilin had never seen the little animal so passive and limp before.

“Essix?” Rollan said, shoving his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“I’m going to put Lumeo into dormant state while we’re here,” Tarik said. “I think it’ll be safer for him . . . for us. I recommend you both do the same.” The otter curled toward Tarik and then vanished.

Meilin shook her head. “It’s all right. I can still control Jhi. And I need the extra alertness, or else I might fall asleep on my feet.” She noticed that Tarik and Rollan were frowning. “What?”

“You shouldn’t think of it as controlling her,” Tarik said.

“Yeah,” Rollan agreed. “Your spirit animal is more like a partner, right, Tarik?”

“Says the last one of us to get his animal into dormant state,” Meilin snapped. “Why would I take any advice from you? Jhi and I have a much better relationship than you and Essix.” She put one arm over the panda’s furry back.

“Hey,” Rollan said. “That’s just mean.”

Meilin knew, with a pang of regret, that she had been hurtful. But she didn’t need anyone telling her how to interact with her own spirit animal. Jhi was fine.

“Let’s all calm down,” Tarik interjected. “The island is going to affect us all badly. We should find the conch so we can get out of here as soon as possible.”

Rollan looked up at Essix. Hesitantly, he opened his shirt and waited. Meilin could tell that he wasn’t at all sure the falcon would go into passive state. She didn’t seem inclined to acknowledge him at all.

Essix stared up at the sky for a long moment. Finally she clacked her beak twice, spread her wings, and vanished into the tattoo on Rollan’s chest.

Rollan exhaled with relief.

“I think it’s this way somewhere,” Meilin said, walking past the trees. “It feels — darker in this direction.” She glanced back at the others, who nodded and followed her.

What had happened here? What could be so bad that it left echoes of evil lingering so long after the last great war?

More trees twisted out of the fog all around them as they walked. They trekked for a long time, through a landscape that didn’t seem to change very much. It was a bit like their endless night of paddling. Meilin’s eyes were heavy and her feet dragged. She wished she could sleep, but she couldn’t imagine letting her guard down enough to do that in a place like this.

The fog wound creepily around her legs, gray now instead of completely black. Maybe there was still a sun out there after all, far beyond this horrible place. Meilin could only see a few paces in front of her.

She realized she couldn’t hear or sense Jhi behind her. But she knew the panda had to be there. She had to be. She was always there.

Meilin stopped and looked back. Nothing: She couldn’t see Tarik or Rollan either. But they must be right behind her. If she just waited for a moment, they would step into sight. And then Jhi would come ambling up behind them.

It wasn’t possible to lose your spirit animal. Not even in a place like this.

Right?

Maybe she should have listened to Tarik.

She remembered Lord MacDonnell's hare, who'd left him after the lord treated him poorly. And Finn's wildcat, who had entered passive state and refused to come out for a long time.

What would she do if Jhi *didn't* wander out of the fog?

Tarik and Rollan appeared, walking side by side. They leaned toward each other a little, looking almost like father and son with their matching dark hair and tan skin. Meilin felt a twist of sadness again. Why did everything have to remind her of her father?

They saw her waiting and stopped too.

"Looking for Jhi?" Tarik asked softly.

Meilin nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Silence fell. Nothing emerged from the fog. There were no sounds of footfalls on the rocks, no flash of black-and-white fur through the mist.

No Jhi.

Meilin pulled her cloak closer, shivering in the damp, eerie air.

The panda would come. She *had* to come.

More long moments passed. Rollan sidled up beside her, and when she didn't protest, he put one arm around her.

"She'll be here in a minute," he whispered.

Meilin nodded again.

And waited.



SUNLIGHT ISLAND

CONOR WOULD GIVE SUNLIGHT ISLAND ONE THING: IT WAS definitely sunny. *Too* sunny. Bright and cheerful and glorious. Palm trees swayed against an azure blue sky; the brilliant white seagulls overhead were nearly as dazzling as mirrors in the blazing light.

It seemed like entirely the wrong place for the forces of the Devourer to be gathered, and yet, there they were — long ships anchored in the bay, men and women swarming between the beach and the jungle with boxes of supplies and weaponry. And, everywhere, animals: hideous, gargantuan, vicious-looking animals.

Snarling tigers paced beside sniggering hyenas on the sand. A wild-eyed baboon shrieked and gibbered at a pair of large-eared caracals, while a scaly anteater scraped at a tree nearby. Three vultures were perched on ship masts, eyeing the people below with what looked like grim patience. And there were more snakes and giant spiders and species of crocodile crawling around than Conor wanted to think about.

Moreover, all this sunshine made it nearly impossible to hide, or move, or do anything stealthy at all. Conor, Abeke, and Kalani had spent most of the day

lying in a shallow hole, covered with palm fronds. They could peek out and see the center of the Conquerors' operations, but hopefully nobody would notice them. They were waiting for it to get dark.

Although even then, there could be eyes everywhere — owls, and bats, and other night predators working for the Devourer.

He hoped their canoe would be safe where they'd hidden it.

Conor wished he could release Briggan. He'd feel much better with his wolf lying alongside him. In the green light that filtered through the palm fronds, he'd noticed Abeke's fingers twitching as if she wanted to be running them through Uraza's fur. The only one who was completely calm was Kalani. She'd wrapped her feather cloak around her and fallen asleep close to midday. Strands of hair had fallen out of her long dark braid and spilled over the jade green swirls of tattoos on her arms and shoulders.

Maybe she's more accustomed to separation from her animal, since she's bonded to a sea creature. Conor thought about her dolphin, and how strange it would be to have to go into the water every time you needed to train or communicate with your spirit animal.

And how does it feel to become queen of your people so young, and in such a sad way? he wondered. He envied her air of confidence and leadership, but not her story.

"The sun's finally setting," Abeke murmured, stretching as well as she could in the cramped space.

"How are we going to look for the conch?" Conor whispered. "What if it's right in the Conquerors' camp or something?"

Kalani opened her eyes, and he wondered how long she'd been awake. "There's a system of caves that runs under the island," she whispered. "I think we should look there first. If I were hiding something on Sunlight Island, that's where I'd take it."

"That makes sense," Abeke agreed softly, and Conor nodded too.

As soon as darkness had spread its quiet wings over the island, the three of

them lifted the palm fronds and crept out of their hiding spot. They could still hear voices and a cacophony of screeches and animal sounds down in the camp.

Abeke released Uraza immediately and Conor did the same, feeling his whole body relax as his fingers touched Briggan's fur. Instantly he could sense a million more details about the night. He could smell the burning palm fronds in the campfires and the cracked coconuts some of the men were sharing. He could hear hissing underneath the loud voices, and the splash of some large predator moving through the bay. He could feel a light breeze lifting the hair on his arms. And even as the night grew darker, it seemed like his eyesight sharpened.

That all made it easier to follow Abeke as she crept through the trees, although she moved so lightly, it was often impossible to see or hear either her or Uraza. Kalani pointed in the direction of the caves and Abeke led the way, pausing now and then to listen, or signaling them to wait while she scouted for lookouts and spies.

If she was the mole, I could be in a lot of trouble right now, Conor thought on one of these occasions, when Abeke had disappeared soundlessly into the brush. What if she came back with a platoon of warriors to trap him? He had the Slate Elephant tucked in his pocket, given to him by Tarik when he'd heard their plan.

On the one hand, it was nice to have the security of a talisman in case a fight broke out. On the other hand, it was a big responsibility. If they got caught, that would mean one more talisman in the Devourer's hands.

He shook himself, feeling guilty. *Abeke isn't going to betray me. She's not the mole. She wouldn't do that.*

But . . . who *would*?

"Coast is clear," Abeke's voice breathed from the shadows, and they crept forward again, edging down a slope. At the bottom Conor spotted a yawning hole in the side of the hill. If this was the entrance to the caves, it was a lot smaller than he'd hoped for. They'd have to crawl inside.

It was, and they did. They crawled several feet, in fact, before reaching a spot where they could stand, where Kalani lit a torch and Conor was able to study the

caves around them. The damp rock walls pressed in close, giving Conor that same claustrophobic feeling he got inside castles like the Earl of Trunswick's. Here there was a lot less space and no soaring ceilings, but the sensation of being trapped inside, too far from freedom and air and light, was the same.

Now Kalani went first, marking the turns they took with a stick that glowed faintly in the dark and left luminescent trails on the stone walls. Conor wasn't sure what system she was using for the symbols. He felt instantly lost in the winding, labyrinthine tunnels, and it seemed like they kept circling back to the same marks, but Kalani walked on confidently with an unworried expression.

They searched methodically, exploring each branching tunnel and dead end. Sometimes they could walk upright; more often they had to crouch, and a few times they crawled on hands and knees through unpleasantly tight spots. Uraza and Briggan squeezed along behind them, both of them sniffing the air and pawing at dark corners.

It seemed like hours passed before they came across something new: a trickling stream flowing along one of the side tunnels and down into darkness. "How big is this cave system?" Conor asked as they stopped to refill their flasks.

Kalani shrugged, sending firelit shadows dancing and jumping behind her. "No one has ever mapped it. I don't know."

All at once, Uraza growled. Abeke scrambled to her feet and peered upstream. "What was that?" she whispered.

Conor and Kalani fell silent, and Conor's sharpened hearing caught the sound too: footsteps, coming this way.

There was no time to hide; the tunnel was straight enough that whoever it was would have already seen their torch. Conor drew his ax and reached for Briggan. At least it sounded like only one person. *One Conqueror.*

The approaching figure reached the edge of their circle of light, paused, and stepped forward so his face was visible: nut brown as Kalani's, with the same nose and wide eyes. He had closely shaved dark hair and tattoos like waves winding across his nose and cheeks.

“Timote!” Kalani cried. She thrust the torch at Conor and jumped forward to wrap her arms around the young man. He swayed slightly, blinking in an unfocused way, and then shook himself, pulled her away to arm’s length, and squinted at her.

“Kalani?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“We were looking for the black conch,” she said. “But I didn’t know you were here! I thought — I was afraid that — Where’s Piri? Are you both all right?”

“Better than all right,” he said, letting go of her and stepping back. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“We can get you out,” Kalani said. “These are my friends — we have a canoe — we can be gone before morning. We can take you home.” She tried to clasp his hand again, and he moved out of reach. “Brother? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not one of you anymore,” he said in a hoarse, strained voice. “I know that you’re the queen now. Do you expect me to come back and bow down to you? Or were you planning on handing the crown right over to me?”

Kalani stared at him, then drew herself up to her full regal height. “I’m not worried about that right now. What’s important is to get you and Piri to safety.”

“You can’t take us anywhere near the tribe!” Timote exploded. He paused, flexing his tattooed fists. “And we wouldn’t go, in any case. Do you remember my spirit animal, Kalani?” he asked.

“Waka?” she said uneasily. “Of course.”

His face muscles twisted into a bitter smile. “Do you remember how he resisted me? How he refused to go into dormant mode? How he would stand there watching me with mocking eyes every time I asked him to do anything?”

Conor had an awful feeling he knew where this was going.

Timote turned and snapped his fingers at the tunnel behind him. There was a slow, painful scraping noise, and a few minutes later an emu hobbled up to stand beside Kalani’s brother.

Abeke stiffened beside Conor, pressing her hands to her mouth. He just

barely managed to hold back a gasp himself.

The bird was taller than either Kalani or Timote, but his long neck drooped and he shuffled in an awkward way. His shaggy brown feathers were patchy and ragged and his eyes were half-closed. One of his claws was jaggedly broken, which explained the limping and the scraping sound.

“Oh, no,” Kalani whispered. “Timote, what have you done?”

“My animal does what I tell him to now,” he said smugly. “I always knew he could be a strong, vicious weapon if he would stop fighting *me* and start fighting whomever I told him to. Now I can make him attack anyone I want.” He glanced meaningfully at Conor.

“But he’s hurt,” Abeke said. Her hand lifted, as if she couldn’t stop herself from trying to help the wounded bird.

“That’s why we’re here,” Timote said. “This stream is supposed to have healing properties. I’m not a monster, Kalani; stop looking at me like that. I fix him up again afterward. It’s just such a relief to have Waka listen to me now. You can’t understand; you and Katoa fit together like fish scales. But for me — imagine, no more pleading, no more bargaining or useless flattery — just, hey, emu, go kick that tiger, and it’s done. And all thanks to this little drink the Reptile King gave me. Is it any wonder I’m happy to stay and fight by his side?”

Kalani shuddered. “What about Piri?” she said softly.

“He’s happier too,” said Timote, as sharply as if he were trying to drive a knife into her chest. “He’s always wanted a spirit animal, and the Bile gave him one. In fact, he got to pick. He chose a killer whale — it’s great. If I could start over and choose for myself, I’d pick one of those too.”

The emu’s head hung even lower, and Conor felt like his heart might break for the once-proud, once-independent bird.

“So that’s it,” Kalani said. “You both work for the enemy now, even though they killed Mother and Father.”

Timote stood looking down at her for a moment. Kalani’s brother swayed slightly, then caught himself and frowned at her.

“Mother and Father belonged to the old world,” he said. “The Reptile King is going to change everything. He’s giving the power of the spirit animal bond to everyone! He’s uniting the continents and his army is —”

Kalani punched him in the face.

It was so powerful and so fast, Conor didn’t quite realize what had happened until Timote keeled over backward and crashed to the floor.

“Oh!” Abeke yelped with surprise.

“That should shut him up for a while,” Kalani said calmly, shaking her hand out. “That no-good shark-faced backstabbing son of a jellyfish.” She turned to Waka, who was nudging Timote mournfully with his beak, and rested her hand lightly on the emu’s back. “I’m so sorry, Waka. Would you — would you escape with us? I promise I’ll look after you. You can hide in our village as long as you want.”

The emu lifted his injured foot and warbled something, then slowly lowered himself to sit beside Timote. Even after everything Timote had done to him, he wouldn’t leave him.

Conor rubbed his teary eyes. He couldn’t imagine someone getting the gift of a spirit animal and then abusing it this way. He reached for the comfort of Briggan’s fur and the wolf leaned into him, as if he needed comforting as well.

“We’d better get out of here as fast as we can,” Abeke said. “If the Conquerors can get inside the heads of anyone who’s drunk the Bile, they probably know we’re here now.”

Kalani nodded and gave her unconscious brother one last, heartbroken look. Then she turned to take the torch again, setting her chin in a determined, queenly way. “There are a lot of tunnels still to search,” she warned them.

Briggan growled slightly, and Conor had a sudden thought.

“Briggan used to be called Pathfinder, back when he was a Great Beast. Maybe he has some . . . vision skills that could at least narrow down the search.”

He crouched so he was nose to nose with the wolf. “Any ideas? Please help us,” he whispered. “We could really use it right now. A black conch — that’s like

a giant seashell. Is it even in these caves?”

Briggan sat back, grinning his wolfish grin, and put one paw over Conor’s hand on the floor.

Conor closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He waited for an image to appear in his head. A long moment passed . . . and then something new caught his attention.

Not a vision . . . a smell.

It was faint, but different from the other damp underground earthy smells of the caves.

It smelled like the deep ocean, like giant ancient sea snails sliding quietly along the bottom of the sea.

He opened his eyes and looked into Briggan’s deep blue gaze. The wolf tilted his head.

“Let’s look down here,” Conor said to the others, pointing to a narrow tunnel that sloped in the direction of the scent.

Kalani opened her mouth, perhaps to argue, but Abeke touched her shoulder lightly and nodded at Conor. He felt a twist of guilt for his earlier worries. She had faith in him. He ought to have the same faith in her.

They left the emu and Timote by the stream. Conor went first, trying to move faster despite slipping on the damp rocks. At the bottom, he breathed in until he figured out the smell was coming from his left, and then he led them in that direction.

More twists, more turns, more dark cave walls pressing in on them. Conor hoped Kalani was keeping track of where they were going, because he wasn’t sure how they’d ever get back.

And then, all at once, the tunnel opened into a small, perfectly round cave. Up above them, moonlight drifted down through a circular hole in the ceiling, illuminating the space. Another tunnel led away from the cave, and at the end of it Conor could see more moonlight glowing — a path to the outside.

But more importantly: A shelf was carved in the back wall of the cave, and

perched on that shelf, directly in the light of the moon, was a giant black conch shell.

Conor darted over to it with a gasp of triumph. Its edges rippled like frozen black water, and the points were wickedly sharp. He lifted it with caution. It weighed as much as one of the silver serving bowls in the Earl of Trunswick's castle.

"It's beautiful," Kalani whispered reverently.

"Let's get out of here," Abeke suggested.

They ran down the tunnel that led toward the moonlight. But as they felt the night wind on their faces, suddenly Briggan growled and Uraza stopped, crouching and flicking her tail.

"What is it?" Conor asked, his heart sinking.

A horrible hiss answered him from the cave entrance.

Kalani raised the torch and they all saw what their animals had sensed first.

Blocking their exit was a huge and deadly Komodo dragon.

THE SCREAMING TREES

ROLLAN REMEMBERED STANDING IN THE FOG WITH HIS ARM around Meilin. He remembered being tired all the way through his toes. He remembered waiting in silence; he remembered staring helplessly into the dark, which was resolutely empty of giant pandas.

He did not remember how he'd gotten here, to the outskirts of a circle of white trees. The fog was gone; the sun shone thinly from behind pale morning clouds.

This couldn't be Nightshade Island. Plants were growing here, and small animals rustled in the undergrowth. Everything smelled clean and fresh.

Everything, that is, except for the horrifyingly enormous silverback gorilla, taller than the walls around Concorba, looming in the center of the clearing.

He smelled pretty awful.

The gorilla squinted in Rollan's direction, as if he'd heard that thought.

Rollan flinched. He might not have had tutors and years of studying, but he certainly knew who the only giant gorilla in the world was.

This had to be Kovo, the Great Ape, who had been aligned with the Devourer in the war.

He was quite definitely on the bad guy list.

But shouldn't he be in prison? Rollan wondered. *How and when did he get out? And where are Tarik and Meilin?*

If the gorilla saw Rollan, he ignored him. Instead Kovo turned back to the far side of the trees, where a boy stood, warily watching the gorilla.

The boy, who looked barely older than Rollan, wore a short travel cloak of fine, deep red velvet, and on his head was a crown. Despite his age, he held himself like a king — a nervous king, facing such a menacing Great Beast, but a king nonetheless. Opals set into the gold crown glinted in the sunshine. His eyes were hard and brown, and he had an arrogant way of holding his head. Something about him was vaguely familiar.

The boy king drew his cloak closer around him. “You . . . you propose we go to war with our neighbors?”

Rollan realized he'd arrived mid-conversation. *Oh. I'm dreaming.* This had to be a dream — but it felt awfully real.

“War is inevitable in your species, I'm afraid,” said Kovo in a dark, rumbling voice that seemed to echo both inside and outside Rollan's head. “The question is whether your people will go to war with you — *for* you — or against you. Now, do not look so crestfallen. There is plenty of time to turn things around.”

“My father spoke of war as a great evil.”

“Your father lived in simpler times. That's not really fair either, if you think about it. He left all of Stetriol's problems to you. But I come to you now with solutions. Take the land you deserve. Arm your people with iron and steel . . . and this.” Kovo held out his hand, revealing a small glass vial.

“Go on,” he said. Rollan could feel the weight of the power behind those words. Who could say no to Kovo? Who would dare?

The king hesitated only a moment, then stepped forward and accepted the vial. He clutched it to his chest and took three steps quickly back. Then he stared

down at the amber liquid inside, greed and ambition written across his face, but also hesitation.

No! Rollan wanted to scream. *It's a trick! Once you drink it, they'll control you!* He clenched his fists, thinking of his mother. If only someone had been there to stop her. *If only the Bile didn't exist in the first place.*

Kovo moved his mouth into something horribly like a smile, but not.

“The Bile . . . the bond it brings,” said the boy. “It will make me stronger? Faster?”

“The gifts vary from bond to bond. But each bond does bring gifts. And you . . .” Kovo spread his massive, hairy arms. “You have the pick of the litter.”

Animals burst out of the forest, crawling or flying or walking toward the pair in the clearing. It seemed to Rollan as though every creature he could think of was suddenly here, swarming around the king, waiting to be chosen.

The boy looked around, a crooked half smile forming on his lips. He lifted the vial toward Kovo in a kind of salute, then drank the whole thing down.

All the trees began to scream.

At least, that's what it felt like to Rollan. He fell forward onto his knees, covering his ears. A long, piercing shriek ripped through the air, like a hundred thousand souls burning endlessly. Darkness blotted out the sun, and a freezing gale tore through the clearing, slicing right through Rollan's cloak and carrying ice into his bones.

Kovo began to laugh, deep, and booming, and terrifying. Rollan squinted up at him and caught a glimpse of the king as he knelt before the gorilla. The boy's hard brown eyes had changed. Now they were like the opals in his crown — shifting and luminous, but somehow blank.

Neither of them seemed to notice the screaming, the darkness, or the wind. Perhaps those were only happening in the dreamworld around the edges of the scene, but they felt horribly real to Rollan.

A huge crocodile appeared on the ground before the king, scaly and hideous and bristling with teeth. The boy reverently reached out to touch it, as if it were a

glorious work of art instead of one of the ugliest, most deadly looking brutes Rollan had ever seen.

“Interesting,” said Kovo. “I knew this was possible, but it’s never happened before. Normally, using the Bile, you would choose an animal to bond with — but for the first time, you, my king, have summoned a true spirit animal.”

“You mean — he would have come to me anyway?” the king asked.

“Yes,” said Kovo. “But your bond is different because of the Bile. Thanks to the Bile, you control him. You’ll be the one in charge. Your spirit animal will do exactly as you please.”

The boy king smiled in a way that Rollan didn’t like at all. The wind seemed to grow stronger, more violent, ripping branches from the trees and throwing small animals off their paws.

Kovo clenched his fists and beat his chest, howling into the wind and noise and darkness.

Rollan felt certain that at any moment the gorilla would turn and attack him. But the wind was too fierce and the sound too blistering for him to move or stand or run or anything.

And then he woke up.

Or rather, Tarik woke him up, shaking his shoulder vigorously.

“Wh-what?” Rollan mumbled. He blinked, disoriented by the sudden return of the eerie, silent fog.

“You were shouting,” Tarik said. “Something about monkeys.”

“Gorillas,” Rollan muttered. “One very big gorilla.” He was lying on the ground, his head resting on a bundle that turned out to be Meilin’s cloak.

“Are you all right?” Tarik asked. He crouched by Rollan’s side. A small worry wrinkle had taken up permanent residence between his eyebrows.

“Yeah, just a dream,” Rollan said, knowing that wasn’t true. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up and twisted around until he saw Meilin.

She was sitting on a boulder with her arms folded around her knees, staring

off into the fog.

There was no sign of Jhi.

Rollan met Tarik's eyes, and the Greencloak shook his head.

"Is he awake?" Meilin called without looking back at them.

"Yes," Tarik answered.

"Then let's go," she said, hopping off the boulder.

"Go . . . ?" Rollan asked.

"Find Jhi," she said. "Silly panda probably fell asleep somewhere, like you just did." The lightness of her tone didn't match the worried look in her eyes. Rollan wasn't sure, but he suspected that she'd been crying. Now she tossed back her hair and set her jaw stubbornly. "We'll retrace our steps and —"

A shuffling sound whispered out of the fog. Meilin whirled around.

And finally, *finally*, Jhi appeared.

Her shoulders were slumped with exhaustion and her paws dragged. But when she saw Meilin, she lifted her head and a kind of light came back into her face.

"Jhi!" Meilin cried. She flung herself at the panda, wrapping her arms around Jhi's neck. Jhi sat back and put one paw around Meilin as well. For a long moment, they just leaned on each other.

Then Meilin jumped back, angrily wiping tears from her eyes. "You scared me!" she snapped. "What took you so long? Where have you been?" She shook her head. "Never mind. You're going into passive mode until we get off this island."

She started to roll up her sleeve, but the panda put a gentle paw on Meilin's hand first. Jhi indicated the fog with her other paw, tilting her head. Then she dropped to all fours and took a step away from Meilin. The expression on her face clearly said, "Well? Are you coming?"

"No," Meilin said. "Whatever you're doing, I don't want to risk you wandering off again." She held out her arm, but Rollan jumped forward.

"Wait," he said. "What if she found the conch? Maybe she's trying to lead us

there.”

“Is that it?” Meilin asked. “Is that where you’ve been?”

Jhi nodded seriously.

Rollan could see the struggle on Meilin’s face. She was really afraid of losing the panda again, perhaps this time forever. He understood. When he couldn’t feel Essix — well, it was horrible, as heart-wrenching and devastating as everything his mother had made him feel. That was the only way to describe it.

“Trust her,” Rollan said quietly.

She shrugged him off. “All right, fine. But you stay right beside me the whole time, all right?” she ordered Jhi.

The panda nodded again, bumping Meilin’s side with her own. Meilin rested her hand on the panda’s back and they started walking with Rollan and Tarik close behind them.

“Um,” Rollan said after a minute.

“Yes?” said Tarik.

“So . . . I’m not trying to be like Conor or anything, but . . . I had this really weird dream back there.”

Tarik bowed his head, listening, as Rollan told him about the gorilla and the king and everything he’d seen.

“What does it mean?” Rollan finished. “Conor’s visions are usually telling him something. Is this a vision of the future — of something that’s going to happen if Kovo gets free?”

“Or the past,” Tarik mused. “This place is haunted by something that happened here long ago. Perhaps what you saw was the terrible moment that made this island the way it is?”

“I guess,” Rollan said. “But how would I dream that?”

“Whatever that was, it left some powerful echoes here,” Tarik said.

“It’s leaving some echoes in my stomach, I can tell you that,” Rollan said. He felt like he’d been turned inside out. All the weirdness of the island seemed to have crept into his blood. Dread trickled through every part of his body.

He caught himself missing Essix. She was right there on his chest, and he knew he could call her out anytime. But he also knew that as long as they were on Nightshade Island, there would be something keeping them apart.

“I hear waves,” Tarik said.

A moment later, the fog shifted and they saw a beach ahead of them, with dark water slowly washing over it. They weren’t exactly back where they started, but if he squinted, Rollan thought he could see the shape of their boat some ways farther along the shore.

Jhi stopped and scraped at the sand with one paw.

“Are you telling us you want to leave?” Meilin asked her, glancing out at the sea. “Because believe me, we all do. It doesn’t help to waste our time with —”

A gleaming white shape began to emerge from the black sand under Jhi’s paws. Rollan let out a cry of excitement and dove for it, digging away the sand. After a moment, Meilin pushed aside Jhi’s clumsy paws and helped him.

It was the white conch, as luminous as a pearl and glowing in the semidarkness. Rollan carefully lifted it free, brushing away the clumps of sand in its crevices.

“Thank you, Jhi,” Tarik said.

“Yes,” said Rollan. “Thank you very, *very* much.”

“Why would it be here, on the beach?” Meilin demanded. “All the energy of the island is in there.” She waved at the dark interior.

“This has nothing to do with that,” Tarik said, taking the conch from Rollan. “This only calls the Kingray, nothing more. Someone knew this island would be a good place to hide it, but my guess is they didn’t want to get any closer to it than they had to. Perhaps they even threw it onshore from a boat, so they wouldn’t have to set foot here.”

“That’s stupid,” Meilin muttered.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Rollan. “We have it now. Let’s get back to the canoe and skedaddle.”

Meilin turned to Jhi with her arm outstretched, then paused. With an

embarrassed glance at Rollan, she leaned forward and kissed the panda on her forehead. Putting her hands on either side of Jhi's face, she whispered, "Don't you ever scare me like that again."

The panda rubbed her nose against Meilin's, blinked, and vanished into Meilin's tattoo.

They set off toward the canoe, traipsing awkwardly through the sand. The conch was heavy and unwieldy in Rollan's arms, and its points kept poking him sharply through his shirt.

"Did you just say 'skedaddle'?" Meilin asked Rollan after a moment.

"It is a very useful word," he said with dignity. "Your fancy tutors never taught you that one?"

"Sure they did," Meilin said. "But I have more sense than to ever use it." Rollan laughed despite himself.

But when he glanced over at her, he noticed her fingers tracing the tattoo where Jhi had disappeared. She might try not to show it, but he guessed that the island — and the feeling of losing Jhi — had deeply unsettled her.

"I hope the others are doing all right," Tarik said as he crouched to dig out the canoe.

"Are you kidding?" Rollan answered. "Where they are can't be as dangerous as this. I bet getting the black conch has been a piece of cake."

TRAPPED

THE TUNNEL EMERGED ONTO A HILLSIDE ONLY A FEW YARDS from one of the Conquerors' campfires. Standing across the mouth of the cave, silhouetted by the moonlight and the flickering flames, was the largest, ugliest lizard that Abeke had ever seen.

It was longer than a man, with a tail like a crocodile and thick, muscular legs that each ended in vicious-looking claws. Its forked tongue slid all the way out, nearly touching the floor, and then back in again. Scaly black-brown skin, dappled with spots of bright green, hung off it in wrinkled folds like an ill-fitting robe. It stared at her with malevolent black eyes, as though it was considering whether to eat her in one bite or two.

Abeke had a brief, wild hope that perhaps they could evade the Komodo dragon, sneak past the Conquerors' camp, and make it off the island without being spotted.

Then a huge, brawny woman with dark hair down to her knees came up behind the giant lizard and spotted them. Her eyes narrowed gleefully.

"Greencloaks!" she bellowed. "Kill them, Peleke!"

The Komodo dragon lunged at Abeke, much faster than any lizard that size should be able to move. Abeke swung her bow around, but before she could get an arrow loaded, Uraza flashed past her and leaped onto the lizard's back.

Peleke whipped around and tried to sink his jagged teeth into Uraza's leg, but she slashed at his nose and roared defiantly, leaving a trail of blood along his flat, ugly snout.

"Don't let it bite her!" Kalani shouted. "A Komodo dragon's bite is toxic!"

Abeke felt a flare of panic. She had her arrow ready, but the lizard was writhing so fast that Uraza was practically a black-and-gold blur. There was no chance of hitting Peleke without endangering the leopard. She watched helplessly as the two hissing, spitting animals rolled out of the cave entrance onto the leaf-strewn soil outside.

Meanwhile, the woman in the cave entrance had drawn two wickedly curved knives out of her sleeves. She stepped back and shouted for backup; Abeke could hear swords clattering as the warriors around the campfire leaped to their feet. In a moment, they would surround the cave, and she, Conor, and Kalani would be trapped.

"Here!" Conor shouted, grabbing Abeke's hand and shoving something into it.

Abeke glanced down and saw the Slate Elephant. She slipped the cord over her head and felt the talisman thump against her chest.

Immediately, Uraza tripled in size. The Komodo dragon had to be at least ten feet long and probably weighed close to two hundred pounds. But now it looked like a garden lizard trapped under a house cat's paws — a really enormous house cat, that is. Uraza snarled again and slammed her front paw onto the back of the lizard's neck, slicing her claws through the tough skin and pinning it to the ground.

The Komodo dragon writhed angrily for another moment, until Abeke was able to dart forward and finish it off with an arrow.

"Run!" Conor shouted.

They pelted out of the cave and swerved away from the campfire, running downhill in the opposite direction. Behind them, Abeke heard Uraza roaring and batting Conquerors away like balls of yarn. She felt the leopard's sinuous strength flowing through her as she hurtled past fallen branches and vaulted over mossy boulders. She smelled the salt tang of the ocean up ahead and veered toward it, even as she also felt Uraza's instinctive shudder of horror at getting any closer to the sea.

They burst out of the trees onto the beach: Abeke, then Briggan and Conor with the enormous conch, then Kalani.

"This way!" Kalani shouted, running toward the cove where they'd hidden their canoe.

Abeke looked back, catching her breath, and saw the tops of the trees thrashing frantically as giant Uraza came barreling down the slope after them. She could hear the clangs and shouts of more Conquerors in pursuit.

"Come on, Uraza!" she shouted. There was no time now for caution or stealth. They had to run, and hope against hope that they could outrun an entire island full of Conquerors and their monstrous beasts.

The giant leopard leaped onto the beach and yowled angrily as sand sprayed up her nose and along her whiskers. Abeke turned to run, but Uraza yowled again and grabbed at Abeke's cloak with one front paw.

Abeke guessed what she was trying to say, and although they'd never done anything like this before, she somehow knew exactly how to clamber up Uraza's leg and where to sit between her shoulders. She leaned forward, burying her face and fists in the leopard's thick fur, and held on for dear life as Uraza rocketed down the beach.

Once, when Abeke was about seven years old, she'd ridden on a camel. She remembered that it was uncomfortable and high and scary, that the camel had rolled alarmingly from side to side as it walked, that it had made awful spitting noises at her, and that Soama had laughed when Abeke cried that she wanted to get off.

This was *nothing* at all like riding a camel.

This was speed and smooth power and pure joy, and if they weren't being chased by a horde of murderous enemies, Abeke would have been happy to keep running like this forever.

She leaned down and called to her friends as Uraza sped toward them.

"Here, climb up!" she shouted, holding out one arm.

"You'll be faster without us!" Kalani shouted back. "Go on ahead and get the boat ready! We'll be right behind you!"

Abeke realized that made sense; they needed to get to their boat before the Conquerors found it. She threw her arms back around the leopard's neck and they flew past Conor and Kalani, reaching the cove first.

So Abeke was the first to see that their carefully constructed hideout of rocks and branches had been dismantled . . . and their canoe was gone.

Standing in its place was a guard of twelve armed Conquerors.

"No!" Abeke shouted, yanking back on Uraza's fur without thinking about it. The leopard skidded to a stop and let out a snarl that shook the trees. She crouched as though she were about to pounce.

"Uraza, wait," Abeke cried. "Go back to Conor and Kalani. This is a trap!"

The leopard growled again, but she stepped back. The Conquerors were already running forward, notching arrows into bows and pulling out throwing knives.

Abeke gripped Uraza's back with her knees and pulled out her own bow. As the leopard turned and ran back to the beach, Abeke twisted around and fired arrow after arrow into the Conquerors' midst. She saw a vicious-looking wild boar go down with a loud squeal. Another arrow struck a bearded man in the shoulder, and he staggered to his knees.

A squawk sounded overhead and Abeke whipped her bow up in time to fire at an attacking seagull just before it dove at her head. She missed, but it shrieked at her and soared away. She wondered if it was the same one who'd tried to steal

the talisman from Conor on the ship. The Slate Elephant bumped against her collarbone, a tempting target for any ambitious attackers.

The Conquerors fell back to regroup behind a wall of rocks as Uraza reached Conor, Briggan, and Kalani.

“The canoe is gone,” Abeke panted, sliding off Uraza’s back.

Conor went white. “How are we going to get off this island?” he said. “Steal one of their boats? They’ll have thought of that,” he answered himself. “They’ll be waiting for us, wherever their boats are.”

“I have a better idea,” Kalani said. “If you don’t mind getting wet — and you don’t mind me borrowing that.” She pointed at the Slate Elephant.

“Oh,” Conor said doubtfully. “Uh — do you think that will work? I’m . . . not the world’s best swimmer.”

“You don’t have to be,” Kalani said. “Katoa and I will take care of you.”

“It’s our best chance,” Abeke agreed. She pulled the talisman off her neck and Uraza shrank to her usual, still-quite-intimidating size. Then she handed it to Kalani, who put it on reverently and waded straight into the ocean.

Conor and Abeke held out their arms; Briggan and Uraza vanished, and almost at the same moment, Kalani’s dolphin appeared. Only now the dolphin was much, much bigger than when they’d first seen him.

Abeke eyed the dolphin’s smooth, rubbery skin anxiously. There was no fur to hold on to here. Kalani was used to riding him, but how would Conor and Abeke stay on?

The dolphin caught Abeke’s eye and smiled. At least, it looked like a smile — a genuine, trust-me, don’t-worry, this’ll-be-fun smile. He flipped his tail and splashed them all.

“Come on,” Kalani said.

Abeke heard voices shouting along the beach. The Conquerors had figured out their plan. There was no more time to lose.

She hurried into the water, paddling the last few feet as the seafloor dipped out of sight below her. Conor flailed and splashed along behind her, still

clutching the black conch under his arm.

Kalani was already on Katoa's back; she reached down and hauled Abeke up behind her. The dolphin felt slippery and cool under Abeke's hands as she wriggled into a sitting position. "Just hang on to me!" Kalani called. Abeke wrapped her arms around the older girl's waist as Kalani dragged Conor onto the dolphin in front of her. He tucked his cloak around the conch in his arms, closed his eyes, and curled into the dolphin with a look of dread on his face.

Abeke held her breath as the giant dolphin plunged into the waves. Salt water stung her nose and throat as they submerged, then came up to the surface again. Conor coughed and sputtered frantically. Abeke clung to Kalani for dear life.

At first it was terrifying, like she was seven all over again, but after a minute she got used to the rise and fall of the dolphin's back between her knees and the way the ocean swept over them each time they went under. It started to feel exhilarating, like leaping through clouds. She took a deep breath in, letting relief sweep through her.

When Abeke twisted around to look back, she saw Sunlight Island rapidly shrinking into the distance. Even as the Conquerors ran for boats to follow them, it was clear they'd never catch up.

Thanks to Katoa and Kalani, she and Conor had gotten the black conch and escaped safely.

Now they just had to hope that Rollan and Meilin had been successful too — and then they could call the Kingray and finally be on their way to Mulop.

ANOTHER DREAM

MEILIN STOOD ON THE RUINS OF A BRIDGE IN A DESOLATE garden, gazing down into the empty ponds below her. The pale orange and white bodies of large, once-beautiful fish lay tangled in the rotting mass of greenery.

All around her, the trees and flowering plants were dead, their lifeless wet branches drooping and broken or flattened pathetically to the ground.

The whole garden looked drowned, as if a tsunami had come through, destroyed everything, and then stormed back into the ocean.

Grandfather Xiao's garden.

She still recognized it, even in this state. She could imagine how her grandparents would shriek at the sight of it, after all the meticulous work they'd done to the place over the years. They would be furious — for five minutes. Then they would roll up their sleeves and start cleaning it up.

Meilin set aside the parasol she was holding, crouched, and started pulling weeds out of the cracks in the bridge's boards, tossing them down into the pond under her.

"Don't waste your energy, Tiny Tiger."

Meilin scrambled to her feet and whirled around.

Her father stepped up onto the bridge, staring out into the garden with grief in his eyes. “I loved this place. I loved it as a child, and I loved bringing you here when you were small.” He flashed a sad smile at her. “It was one of the few places you ever had a chance to play. You’ve had to grow up so fast, Meilin.”

“Father,” Meilin choked out. He looked . . . healthy, strong, powerful. Alive.

Something moved in the overgrown bushes behind him. Meilin tensed and reached for the parasol — but it wasn’t a parasol anymore. It was a spear, the end wickedly sharp and gleaming.

Then Jhi stepped out of the greenery and looked around, blinking slowly. Her silver eyes met Meilin’s and she came padding up onto the bridge. Meilin’s father looked down at the panda as she passed him.

“A terrible mistake,” he murmured.

“She’s not,” Meilin said. “I thought so at first, but . . . we are meant for each other.”

Jhi stood up on her hind legs and rested her front paws on the shattered railing of the bridge. The black fur around her eyes made them seem even larger and sadder. “I hope you always remember that, Meilin,” she said in a velvety voice.

A sense of foreboding shivered across Meilin’s skin. Up in the sky, a flock of ravens erupted from one of the dead trees and scattered across the gray clouds, cawing harshly.

“Get out!” her father shouted abruptly. Meilin jumped, terrified by the anger in his voice. He took a step toward Meilin and stared furiously into her eyes. “Get out!” he shouted again. “You’re not my daughter!”

Meilin stumbled back, nearly falling through a spot where the wood of the bridge had rotted completely away.

“I am!” she cried. “Father, what’s wrong?”

Blood began to bubble out from between his lips. To her horror, Meilin saw more patches of blood spreading all across his chest, seeping through his robe. “I never should have listened to you!” he hissed.

“I’m sorry,” Meilin said, her voice trembling. “Father, please.” But he shoved away her outstretched hands and turned his back on her. His back, too, was bleeding from a hundred wounds, many of them the size and shape of giant crocodile teeth.

“Don’t touch me,” he growled. “You’re not my daughter.”

It began to rain, the kind of cold, dripping, mind-numbing rain you’d expect to symbolize misery in a dream.

“Jhi,” Meilin pleaded, turning to her spirit animal. “What’s wrong with him? Why is he so angry at me?” She buried her face in her hands. “Because I got him killed, is that why?”

“Meilin,” said the panda. Jhi came up beside Meilin, pressing her warm bulk against the girl’s side. “Forgive yourself. Now, and then, and later.”

“I can’t,” Meilin whispered through her tears.

“There is worse to come,” Jhi warned softly.

“Worse than losing my father and all of Zhong?” Meilin asked. General Teng started to limp away, clutching his side and stopping for breath every few minutes. All she wanted was to run after him and have him fold her in his arms, the way he used to when she was small.

But the fury in his eyes . . . She couldn’t face it again.

“Worse,” murmured Jhi. “Oh, Meilin . . . I can’t tell you, but you need to know. . . .”

Her voice trailed off as a freezing wind began to sweep through the garden.

“What is it?” Meilin asked. “What’s going to happen?”

Jhi leaned forward as though she was trying to speak, but the wind, and rain, and rattling dead branches drowned out her voice. Meilin crouched and put her hands on either side of Jhi’s face, bringing them nose to nose. But she still couldn’t hear anything Jhi said. Whatever warning the panda was trying to deliver, it couldn’t get through.

All Meilin could see was herself reflected in Jhi’s silver eyes: a girl with no father and no home, a girl who couldn’t trust anyone. A girl who had to save

Erdas with nothing but a panda.

Meilin closed her eyes and rested her forehead against Jhi's soft black-and-white fur.

When she opened them again, Jhi was gone and Meilin was back in the canoe, rocking on the waves. The sky was the lavender of her handmaiden Kusha's favorite silk kimono; a few stars were just beginning to glimmer above her as the sun set. Her legs ached and her arms felt like they were full of small needles. She realized she'd had her face pressed against her spirit animal tattoo as she slept.

She sat up, rubbing her upper arms, and Rollan pulled his paddle in and twisted around to look at her.

"I'm glad you got some sleep," he said. "It looked like you needed it."

Meilin didn't answer. She would have chosen to go without sleep for a week if she could have avoided that dream.

Now it would haunt her forever: her father's bloodied face shouting "Get out!" and "You're not my daughter!" surrounded by the wreckage of her childhood.

She curled her arms around her legs and closed her eyes, determined not to cry.

It was just a dream.

Except the last time she'd spoken to Jhi in a dream, the panda had helped her wake up to realize she was sleepwalking in the rain on Sunset Tower.

So what did this dream mean?

Was something terrible about to happen?

What was Jhi trying to tell her?

THE KINGRAY

DAGGER POINT TURNED OUT TO BE A LONG, NARROW PENINSULA ending in a chain of sharper and sharper rocks that jutted into the sea like it was knifing it. It was the northernmost point of the southernmost island in the Hundred Isles, and in places the cool blue sea was so calm and the reflections of the clouds so clear that it looked as if you'd be leaping right into the sky if you dove in.

Of course, Rollan had no intention of doing any such thing.

He was a sensible person who would keep his boots on land as much as possible, thank you very much. Unlike some people, who were evidently comfortable gallivanting around the ocean on giant dolphins.

He squinted at Conor and Abeke as Kalani's dolphin swam up to the shore, and revised that assessment. Conor looked anything *but* comfortable.

The good news, though, was that as Conor wobbled off the side of the dolphin and floundered ashore with Abeke and Kalani's help, Rollan caught a clear glimpse of the black conch in his arms.

"They did it," he said to Meilin. She was standing on the sharpest rock at the end of the daggerlike archipelago, hands on her hips, staring out to sea with the wind tossing her dark ponytail.

“Of course they did,” she said without turning around.

“Has anyone ever told you that your trust issues are all over the place?” Rollan asked.

She just snorted in response.

Lenori was on the beach, next to the canoe she’d brought and the ashes of the *tapu*-touched canoe they’d had to burn. She waited as the others staggered through the waves. They were too far away to hear, but Rollan saw her step forward and say something to Kalani. The young queen flinched back and made a sign with her hands in the direction of Dagger Point. In the direction of Rollan and Meilin.

And Tarik, who stood behind him. Tarik put one hand on Rollan’s shoulder.

“She’s warding off evil,” he explained simply.

“Great,” Rollan said. “We step on one haunted island and suddenly we’re evil?”

“You felt that place,” Tarik said. “You know it’s more than superstition; they’re right to fear it. We can’t burden Kalani with the weight of *tapu*. She has her whole tribe to think of. She’s better off staying away from us.”

Rollan tilted his head back to watch Essix soaring in high, swooping circles far overhead. He just knew he never wanted to go back to Nightshade Island ever again. And if he could shake the nightmare of staring into Kovo’s malevolent eyes, that would be great too.

“Bye,” he heard Meilin whisper. He followed her gaze to where Kalani and her dolphin — now back to its regular size — were swimming away. He wondered if the young queen would be able to keep her people safe with so many Conquerors so close by.

Conor echoed that thought as he climbed out over the long rocks toward them. Rollan could hear him asking Lenori, “But won’t the Conquerors know it was her who helped us? What if they punish her?”

“Kalani is a wise and strong queen,” Lenori assured him. “She will protect them as long as she can.” The rest of the thought was left unspoken, but Rollan

could finish it in his head: *The best way to help her is to stop the Devourer once and for all.*

Rollan reached out a hand to help Conor hop onto the rock next to him.

Conor grinned his thanks. “I understand you guys are all touched by the spirit of darkness now or something.”

“No joke,” Rollan said. “I might accidentally kill you in my sleep.”

Conor’s smile faltered, and Rollan realized that it wasn’t at all funny, with an actual mole in their midst somewhere who might one day try to do exactly that.

“Sorry,” he said. “Just kidding. Um . . . so how was Sunlight Island?”

“A little terrifying,” Conor admitted. “But Abeke and Uraza were amazing.”

“Conor’s the one who found the conch,” Abeke said, and they exchanged a smile.

Wish I could say we had a bonding experience too, Rollan thought. *But it was kind of more of an un-bonding experience.* Then again, he remembered the curl of Meilin’s fingers between his, and her slender, strong shoulders leaning into his arm. He wasn’t actually sure if they were closer or further apart than ever right now. She’d barely said more than five words since they left Nightshade Island, even when he’d tried saying some deliberately stupid things to provoke her into teasing him.

As if his thought had summoned her, Meilin turned and balanced her way back along the rocks toward them, hopping gracefully like a jungle cat.

Abeke frowned and ducked her head to peer into Meilin’s face. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Meilin snapped.

“You just — sorry, you look — you just look like you’ve seen a ghost, or — more like a ghost has cut off one of your arms or something. So I just thought — if you want to talk about it —”

That was eerily close, Rollan thought. He remembered someone saying once that losing a spirit animal was worse than losing a limb. He flexed his hand and looked up to check on Essix again.

Meilin gave Abeke a withering look. “I don’t have anything I need to talk about with *you*,” she said. “Or with *anyone* here.” She glared around at Tarik, Conor, Lenori, and Rollan. “Nobody wants to say it, but we all know that one of us is the mole. One of us has been helping the enemy. Somebody here has been telling them how to find us — which means somebody here led the Conquerors right to us in Zhong. Whoever the mole is —” She looked straight at Abeke. “*That’s* the person who killed my father.”

“Meilin —” Tarik said quietly. Abeke looked as if she’d been stabbed.

“So no, I don’t want to have a heartfelt conversation about our *feelings*,” Meilin went on. “I want to call this Kingray, get the Coral Octopus, and finish this stupid quest before the Conquerors catch up to us yet again.” She snatched the white conch out of Rollan’s hands and snapped her fingers twice at Conor. “Ready?”

“Um.” He fumbled with the black conch for a moment, then finally raised it to his mouth and nodded.

Meilin drew a deep breath, and together they blew a long, resonant, rolling sound across the waves. The tone of the black conch was higher than that of the white conch, but they blended together like eerie music. The notes reverberated in Rollan’s ears and seemed to echo across the water long after Meilin and Conor finally lowered the seashells.

Nothing happened for several minutes.

“Didn’t it work?” Meilin asked Lenori impatiently. “Did we do it wrong?”

Lenori spread her hands with that infinitely serene expression of hers, which Rollan was fairly certain was Meilin’s least favorite expression in Lenori’s repertoire.

But before they could start to argue, Rollan spotted a strange ripple in the sea — like a wave going the wrong way, cutting across the other, regular waves.

“There!” he cried, pointing.

It was definitely coming toward them.

“Is it the Kingray?” Abeke asked.

“I’m guessing yes,” Rollan said, “unless there happen to be a lot of comically oversized stingrays around these parts.”

He was joking, but the flat, rippling creature coming toward them gave him the definite heebie-jeebies. Its edges flowed like banners moving in the wind. It had nothing that could be called a head or limbs. Strange black eyes peered at them from the top of the flat surface, and a long, thin tail like a pointed stick jutted out the back.

And *huge* didn’t seem like quite the word for it. It was massive, like a large gray raft. *Gray* wasn’t the right description for its color either: something else, somewhere between dark green and violet and sand with freckles of russet red and splashes of brown. It was not a normal color.

It was not a normal animal.

The Kingray slowed to a stop in front of them and floated there in the water. Like an underwater flying carpet, just waiting for them to step aboard.

“That is a big — that is a weird — I don’t even —” Rollan ran out of half-sentences. There was really no part of him, not even the tiniest hidden small corner, that wanted to climb on board the world’s most enormous stingray.

“We’re really supposed to ride it?” Conor asked Tarik.

“There’s nothing to hang on to,” Rollan pointed out.

“And it’s not big enough for all six of us,” Meilin added. “Four at the most.” She stepped forward. “Well, *I’m* not staying here.” She crouched and rested one foot lightly on the Kingray’s back. When it didn’t move, she shifted her weight forward and then stepped all the way onto it.

The Kingray sank a few inches and rippled quietly, unconcerned.

“No worse than riding a rockback whale surrounded by sharks,” Meilin said, and Rollan thought he saw a glimmer of her usual teasing spirit in her eyes. “But of course, Rollan, if you’re too *scared* to ride a giant stingray, you could always stay here. . . .”

“I’m not scared,” he protested. “I just think it would be more sensible to take, say, a boat, and maybe follow the Kingray wherever it’s going.”

They all looked at the Kingray for a reaction to this. There was none. It continued to ripple quietly. Rollan found himself appreciating the fact that at least his spirit animal had a face. If someone bonded with a stingray, how would they ever know what it was thinking? At least Essix could use her face — and beak, and talons, and piercing voice — to make her emotions quite clear.

“I don’t think a boat could keep up with the Kingray,” Abeke guessed. “You saw how fast it traveled. That’s probably part of the point — since only the Kingray knows how to get to Mulop, this way only a limited number of people can visit him at once.”

Lenori nodded. “That does make sense. He’s a private octopus.”

Rollan bit back a laugh. A year ago, racing through the streets of Concorba, surviving on scraps and arguing over nicknames with his former friends, Rollan could never in his life have expected to hear someone say “he’s a private octopus” with such grave intensity.

“It should be the four of us,” Conor said. “The Four Fallen. That’s who Mulop wants to see.” He turned to Tarik. “You get the ship and the whales ready to leave. We’ll go get the talisman.”

“No,” Tarik said, stepping forward with a determined expression. “I can’t send you all off into the ocean — into the entire wide-open *ocean*, to any of a *hundred* islands — with no idea of where you’re going or whether it’s safe. What kind of protector would do that? Hand you over to a giant stingray, with no way to find you if you don’t come back? If anything happened to any of the Four Fallen . . . if anything happened to any of *you* . . . it would — I couldn’t —”

He broke off, shaking his head. There was a moment of strange quiet. None of them had ever seen Tarik so emotional.

“Oh, Tarik,” Lenori said sympathetically. “You’re starting to sound like a worried father. I understand that you care about them; we both do. But they’re not ordinary children, and in this case they’re right. Mulop wants to see the Four Fallen.”

“Well, he can see three of the Fallen and me,” Tarik said stubbornly.

“Really?” Meilin challenged him. “Which one of us would *you* leave behind?”

Tarik looked at each of them in turn, unhappiness written in deep lines across his face. Rollan could hear the unspoken question underneath Meilin’s. *Who do you think is the mole? Which of us do you trust the least?*

After all this time traveling with Tarik, Rollan knew him well enough to know he would never answer that question. It would devastate whomever he chose, and Tarik was too protective to do that, even if he did have his own private suspicions.

“We’ll be careful, Tarik,” Conor promised. “This is the only way to get the talisman.”

“I agree,” said Lenori. She pushed back the folds of her green cloak and put her hands to her temples, closing her eyes as though she was trying to remember her dreams. “I’m sorry, Tarik, but in every one of my visions, I’ve seen all four of the Fallen — Jhi, Uraza, Briggan, and Essix. I’m afraid if any of them don’t show up, Mulop may decide not to help us. Can we risk losing this talisman?”

“Isn’t it worse to risk losing Meilin, Abeke, Conor, or Rollan?” Tarik demanded. “Or all of them at once? Sometimes . . . sometimes I wonder if Barlow was right, Lenori. We ask so much of them so young. Ordinary or not, they *are* children.”

Rollan remembered Barlow, the former Greencloak they’d met on their very first quest through the mountains of Amaya. Barlow didn’t like that the Greencloaks recruited kids, and he’d said as much to Tarik.

Had Tarik been carrying that same worry around all this time?

“Mulop is not dangerous like Cabaro or Dinesh,” Lenori insisted. “He’s friendly to our cause, and we should keep him that way.”

“Besides,” Rollan pointed out, “the mole can’t betray us this time, because none of us know where we’re going. Right? That’s the upside of being a secret location — the bad guys can’t find it either.” He nudged Tarik’s arm.

There was a sort of awkward pause, as if everyone else had been worrying

about the mole too, but trying not to bring it up.

Abeke nodded. “It’s really all right, Tarik. You’ve taught us well. We can take care of each other, and we’ll be back soon.”

Tarik rubbed his face with a furious movement. “I can feel that this is wrong,” he said. “I’m no seer, but I’ve been in more than a few battles and there’s a sense you get when things aren’t right. Lumeo is anxious too. Don’t any of you feel it? I fear that something awful is about to happen.”

“That’s just your worry talking,” Meilin said, shifting impatiently. Her hand went to the tattoo of Jhi, and she bit her lip.

“Yeah, it sounds kind of like how I feel all the time,” Rollan tried to joke. He’d never seen the elder Greencloak so nervous. Usually Tarik was cool and collected — a force of calm even when things looked bad. If even stone-faced Tarik was scared, shouldn’t the rest of them be?

“Have faith in us,” Conor said with a smile. He held out his hand for Tarik to shake.

The Greencloak still looked unhappy and unconvinced. Slowly he took Conor’s hand. “Promise me you’ll be careful. Promise me you’ll come back.”

“Of course,” Conor said.

“We promise,” Abeke added, and Rollan and Meilin nodded too.

Tarik sighed and dropped Conor’s hand. “Here’s the Granite Ram,” he said, handing it to Rollan. “I hope it helps you.”

“And I have the Slate Elephant,” Abeke said, touching her pocket.

“Don’t worry about us,” Meilin said. “We’ll be back soon.”

Tarik reached up to his shoulder and gathered Lumeo in his hands, as if he needed something to hold on to.

Abeke was already climbing down onto the stingray. Rollan couldn’t stand around like a coward any longer. He scrambled over the rocks until he could lower his feet onto the ray’s back. Like Meilin, he carefully leaned his weight forward, then stood up — and promptly slipped and fell right into the ocean.

Meilin reached in and hauled him back out. “Idiot,” she said, but he thought

he detected a note of affection in there.

“Just testing the water,” he said. “Nice and warm. Much warmer than — ah, than the last time I got dunked.” That was in Eura, when that brutish walrus had stolen the Crystal Polar Bear.

Conor joined them, crouching next to Abeke, who’d seated herself cross-legged. Rollan sat on her other side, as close to the middle of the ray as he could get. Its back felt weird and rubbery under his fingers, with an odd prickly texture when he swept his hand in the wrong direction, but smooth as skin in the other.

It was also extremely wet. The Kingray was floating just below the surface of the water, and sank slightly as they each climbed on, so they were all partially submerged by the time everyone was on board. Seawater sloshed around their legs and soaked their pants.

Abeke brushed her leopard tattoo with her fingers. “Uraza would hate this,” she said.

Meilin glanced down at them, as if she was considering trying to stay upright for the ride. But finally she sat down as well, wrinkling her nose and wrapping her cloak up around her shoulders to keep it dry.

The moment she was seated, the Kingray began to move, rippling forward and out into the open ocean.

“Good luck!” Tarik called anxiously. “Please be safe!” Lenori was right; the elder Greencloak sounded more like a parent than a guardian. Rollan felt a strange tug of concern. He wasn’t sure if it was just Tarik’s worry spreading to him, but suddenly the sky seemed heavy above them. Why did this parting feel so final?

Rollan waved good-bye as Dagger Point, Lenori, and Tarik rapidly shrank to tiny shapes behind them. He was surprised to realize how much he wished Tarik could have come with them after all. He tilted his head back to make sure Essix was still above them, following the Kingray, although he didn’t really need to look to know that. He could sense her there, all the more keenly now that the

experience on Nightshade Island had let him know what a giant empty hole would be left in his chest without her.

The ocean flew past in a blue-green blur, with white sprays of water pluming on either side of them. From the ship, Rollan had looked out at Oceanus and thought it was a sunny, beautiful place. He didn't know anyone who'd ever spent time playing or relaxing on a beach, but he'd heard that it was something the wealthy of Concorba would travel miles to do. He'd never understood that — why roll around in sand and deal with roaring, moving water if you didn't have to?

Seeing the beaches of Oceanus had given him a glimpse of the appeal. He'd now traveled across almost the entire world of Erdas, and these islands were possibly the most beautiful of any of the places they'd visited.

But the view from the deck of a ship was quite different from the view on top of a giant stingray.

The sparkling, glassy turquoise waters turned out to be teeming with life, and it was even more visible to Rollan with the extra-sharp eyesight that came from his bond with Essix. Countless fish in every color of the rainbow swam below them, including several of the large silver ones that Rollan remembered seeing in the fish traps they'd waded past in the harbor of Xin Kao Dai. None of the sea life seemed afraid of the Kingray; many of the fish came close enough for Rollan to touch, if he wanted to risk leaning over the side to try.

One school of thin lemon-yellow fish darted by, each of them as long as his arm. Far below them, on the sandy ocean floor, Rollan spotted a huge starfish with stubby teeth-like ridges along its five arms; it glowed the same amber color as Essix's eyes.

As long as he remained seated, it was easier than he would have expected to stay on the Kingray. Rollan had half imagined that he'd go flying off the minute it moved, but they sped along smoothly. It was almost no different than sitting on a floor, apart from the wind rushing through his hair and the water spraying his face.

He had a strange flash of a memory — something he hadn't thought about in years. In it, he was very small, and his mother was there. She'd set him on a scrap of red-and-gold carpet and then pulled him around the room like it was a sled, faster and faster, whirling and laughing. He remembered her laughing face, eyes shining at him. He remembered giggling until he fell off the carpet, over and over again.

That must have been one of her rare good days. He hadn't thought he had any happy memories of her.

Much good it does me, he thought savagely. She's the Devourer's slave now, controlled by the Bile. Even if I did want my mother back, I couldn't have her.

He felt something brush his knee and looked up into Meilin's eyes. The wind had flung away the cord she usually used to tie up her hair, and now it flew in a wild dark cloud around her head. When he'd met her, he'd been struck by her beauty, but now when he looked at her he saw so much more — her unbelievable fighting skills, her intelligence, her sharp humor, her steely strength.

I'm glad it was me that Essix chose, he realized. I'm glad it was me, and I'm glad Jhi chose her.

Meilin touched his knee again and tilted her head, as if she'd seen some of his struggle in his face, but she didn't want to intrude by asking.

"Nothing important," he said, answering her unspoken question.

"Just . . . thinking about Aidana."

"Maybe there's a way to set her free," she said. "If there is, I promise you we'll find it."

He nodded, not quite ready yet to let himself hope. His gaze shifted back to the water, where he could now see a coral reef not far off to their left, bright pinks and purples and oranges in the shapes of strange frozen plants. The whole thing shimmered with the movement of hundreds of sea creatures, darting in and out of the small holes or crawling along the outside of the coral.

"Look," Abeke said in a breathless voice. She pointed to something swimming up ahead of them — lots of somethings, parts of them surfacing and

submerging as they swam.

“Sharks?” Conor asked nervously.

“No,” Meilin said, cracking her first smile since Nightshade Island. “Seals.”

The Kingray sailed smoothly right through the pod of seals; they parted to let it by as quickly and neatly as street urchins scattering before a carriage in the city. Sleek brown heads popped out of the water to watch them go by. Rollan grinned at the curious, almost puzzled expressions on their whiskered faces. Their eyes were huge and brown and surprisingly human, a lot like the baby orangutan’s. Most of them had rolls of fat under their necks like double chins, making them look even sillier.

With a twinge of guilt, Rollan thought of the seal hunt they’d witnessed with the Ardu in Arctica. These seals looked smaller and sleeker than those, gleaming like oiled wood under the water. *They’d understand, though*, he told himself. *They have to eat to survive too, just like the Ardu hunters.*

Three of the seals — the smallest and therefore perhaps the youngest and the bravest — followed the Kingray for as long as they could keep up. They kept darting under the Kingray and popping up on the other side, then flipping their tails to splash the riders and ducking under again.

“They’re trying to play with us,” Abeke said, delighted.

“They kind of remind me of Lumeo,” Conor said. “Or some of the puppies we had when I was a kid.” He waved at the closest seal and it whacked the water with one of its flippers, its eyes sparkling mischievously.

Rollan twisted to watch the seals vanish under the water as the Kingray pulled away from them. He wondered if he and his friends would survive long enough to see a day when they could just enjoy a place like this — the sunshine, swimming with the seals, the warm water. He could almost, but not quite, imagine what it would be like if they didn’t have the darkness of the Devourer hanging over them and the weight of Erdas’s future in their hands.

“Are we slowing down?” Conor asked.

Rollan dipped his fingertips in the ocean and watched the ripples flow past. “I

think so,” he said. He squinted up in the direction the Kingray was swimming. “Does that mean that’s where we’re going?”

They all turned to look at the island that was coming closer and closer. Rollan had expected something majestic and weird for the home of a Great Beast — an entire palace made of seaweed, perhaps. But this was a perfectly ordinary-looking island, perhaps a bit more rocky and bare than the other ninety-nine that made up the Hundred Isles. There was nothing extraordinary about it at all.

But this was clearly their destination. The only landing spot was a crescent-shaped cove with a white sand beach; tall cliffs of rock made up the other sides of the island, knobbed and pockmarked and rough like a coral reef. The Kingray gradually slowed more and more until it floated solemnly into the cove and flared to a stop in shallow water.

“This is it?” Rollan asked the giant stingray.

“Where’s Mulop?” Meilin demanded. They could see pretty much the whole island from where they were, and there was certainly nothing that looked like a giant octopus.

The Kingray, predictably, did not answer.

“I guess that’s our cue to start looking,” Conor said cheerfully. He rolled off into the waves and splashed over to the beach. Two reddish-orange crabs the size of Rollan’s hand saw Conor coming and scuttled away sideways into their holes. They vanished just as Briggan appeared from Conor’s tattoo and bounded onto the sand. The wolf shook himself vigorously and started galloping up and down the beach like a puppy finally let into the sunshine after a rainy day.

“Maybe Mulop is underwater?” Abeke guessed. She scooted off the Kingray, peering into the sapphire blue sea as she jumped in. Apart from the clouds of sand kicked up by Conor as he’d gone ashore, the water was clear enough to see the ocean floor for a long way in each direction. Nothing there looked like a giant octopus either, or like the entrance to a giant octopus’s secret lair.

Rollan felt a flicker of intuition stirring in his brain. He looked up at Essix, soaring overhead, and felt it again, even stronger. They *were* close to Mulop. But

they wouldn't find him down on the beach — they had to climb up the rocks to the cliffs and search there, as odd as that seemed.

Nobody argued with him, though, when he and Meilin reached the sand and he told them what he'd felt.

“All right,” Conor said. “Let's climb.”

“Are you going to wait for us?” Meilin asked the Kingray. “Float there unhelpfully like a wet piece of silk if the answer is yes.”

The Kingray stared impassively at her, rippling quietly.

“That better be a yes,” Rollan said. “I really do not want to get stuck here.”

Essix came soaring down and landed suddenly on his shoulder. Her talons gently squeezed and she nibbled at his hair with her beak.

“Can you help us find Mulop?” he asked her.

She clacked her beak and he felt it again, like something physically tugging him up the rocks. He followed the sensation, leading the way up until they reached the top of the island cliffs. There were no trees up here, nothing but a flat tabletop of stone and a view out to distant green-and-white islands.

Except for one thing: a great wide hole in the stone, yawning and dark like an open mouth.

Rollan immediately regretted having that thought. Because the only thing to do, the obvious thing to do, was to climb down into it.

He pulled out the Granite Ram, remembering Tarik's worried face as the Greencloak handed it to him. “I'll go first,” he offered. He slipped the talisman around his neck and swung his legs into the hole. It wasn't a straight dark shaft after all; he immediately felt a ledge below his feet, and then he saw boulders strewn about all the way down, and light glowing at the bottom.

As he climbed down, the Granite Ram helped him leap lightly from one boulder to the next, keeping his feet even as the rocks became wetter and more slippery. It became brighter and brighter the farther down he went, and soon he realized that there were other holes in the walls, allowing sunlight to filter into the cavern.

Finally he felt solid ground underfoot and stopped, looking around him for the first time. He found himself standing on a lip of rock in an underground grotto, facing a vast hidden lake. Small, murmuring waves lapped at his feet. The air was damp but smelled fresh and clean, like the sky after a rainstorm.

Emerald green sunbeams poured down through a hundred small holes in the rocks overhead, while at the same time an eerie, radiantly blue light glowed from under the water itself. Rollan felt like he was standing inside a piece of sea glass.

He heard scrambling noises overhead and turned, climbing back up the rocks a ways until he could pass the Granite Ram to the others.

They each slid down next to him, Meilin and then Conor and Briggan, and then Abeke, and stared around with startled eyes.

“It’s beautiful,” Abeke whispered, but even that small sound echoed off the high ceilings and came murmuring back to them.

“Yes,” said a new voice, dark and rich and somehow full of bubbles. “I’ve always thought so too.”

Rollan felt Meilin seize his hand and grip it tightly.

A shape was rising out of the water: the shape of the largest octopus the world had ever seen.

They’d found Mulop, at last.

MULOP

THE OCTOPUS REGARDED THEM FOR A LONG MOMENT, DURING which Conor found himself completely unable to speak. Mulop’s bulbous dark orange head nearly touched the rocks overhead, and yet there was obviously a lot more of him still hidden underwater. He looked like a giant brain on top of a pair of eyes on top of a web of tentacles, and that was it. His expression was completely unreadable. Angry? Bemused? Delighted? Half asleep? Conor had no idea.

“Hmm,” Mulop said at length. A long, purplish-orange tentacle snaked out of the water and poked at Briggan, who had scrambled down the rocks behind Conor. The wolf sniffed at the tentacle and sneezed, but stayed still as it drifted over his fur and tail and paws.

“Smaller than I remember,” mused Mulop. Conor couldn’t see a mouth — he couldn’t see anything but enormous deep green eyes in that huge dark orange head — but as with the other Great Beasts, he seemed to hear the octopus’s voice inside his head as well as echoing throughout the cavern.

“Is this what I remember?” Mulop asked thoughtfully. “No, I’m right, he was bigger before.”

Briggan yipped, as if defending himself.

“Yes, yes,” Mulop said. “Time to grow. Certainly, if there is time, and space for growing, and giant wolfishness to grow into, anyone could, perhaps.”

The tentacle moved suddenly to Conor, wrapping around his whole body and then patting his face. Rubbery suction cups squished against his cheeks and brushed his eyelashes. He held his breath, trying to appear infinitely braver than he actually felt.

“Hmm,” Mulop said again. “Also smaller than I expected.” The tentacle tapped his nose and then poked him in the stomach, nearly knocking the breath from him. “Thought they came bigger than this, didn’t I? I certainly did. Remember the tall ones from last time? True, still rather small, but not this small. Less time to grow here, but some. Also mute? Very unexpected. Did I expect that? No, I did not.”

“I’m not mute,” Conor blurted.

The tentacle patted his face again, and he got a strong impression that Mulop was pleased.

“Excellent,” said the octopus. His voice was quiet but had an echoing quality to it, and a bass note like it was being pulled up from the far depths of the ocean. “Won’t that make things easier? It will, I’m right. I prefer questions, don’t I? Yes, otherwise it’s hard to keep track of what I know and others don’t know, and there’s so much I know and everyone else doesn’t know, but then it’s not surprising when I know so much, after all. Oh, I have a question. Go ahead.” He paused, and Conor thought for a moment that Mulop was waiting for him to speak, but then the octopus sailed right on. “Where are my other friends? Ah, good question. I think they’re here, don’t I? Indeed.”

It’s like he’s talking to himself, Conor realized. He wondered if it was lonely, being the only underwater Great Beast. Perhaps Mulop talked to himself because there was usually no one else to talk to.

The tentacle let go of Conor and moved on to prod the others, one at a time. “Friends? Friends? Are you in there? Don’t be shy. Do I think they’re being shy? That certainly doesn’t sound like them. Uraza was never — aha!” The huge

octopus's eyes lit up with delight as Jhi appeared on the ledge beside Meilin. "Oh, panda panda panda. Unnaturally small furball. I've missed you, haven't I? Yes, I have."

Jhi gave the tentacle a friendly pat with one of her paws, then submitted graciously as the tentacle wound around her and gave an affectionate squeeze.

"It has been both quieter and more noisy in here without you," said Mulop. Another long tentacle lifted out of the water and indicated his great head. "You know what I mean."

Jhi inclined her own head sympathetically.

Essix descended into the cave with a flurry of wing flapping, landing on a boulder beside Rollan at the same time that Abeke held out her hand and released Uraza.

"All of you back," Mulop said, his tentacle moving over toward Uraza. The leopard growled at it. Unfazed, Mulop lifted his tentacle and waved it in a mirror image of Uraza's lashing tail. "Such a strange and lovely and terrible time. Aren't I thrilled beyond measure to see my four fallen siblings again? I am. And yet there is one I'd rather not see, but she is free, free as a snake, and so we come around again and all the old danger is new once more."

He drew his tentacles back into the water and subsided thoughtfully.

"Wait," Rollan said. "What?"

"Free as a snake?" Conor echoed alertly. "Are you talking about Gerathon?"

"Don't you know? Or is that a thing only I know? Ah, that is a thing I know. Maybe that is why I called you. My head is full of warnings, but which, but which is for you, that is the question."

"Um, I say give us all of them," Rollan volunteered. "All the warnings, please."

"Has Gerathon escaped from her prison?" Conor pressed.

"Most absolutely," Mulop said. Conor felt a horrible prickling all through his body, like dread was trying to flip his skin inside out.

"I thought that was impossible!" Abeke cried. "How did she get out?"

“My siblings specialize in the impossible,” Mulop observed. “And no, clearly not impossible. Haven’t you noticed her touch everywhere? She is the one who controls the drinkers of her Bile.”

Beside Conor, Rollan gave a little start. Conor guessed that Rollan hadn’t really thought about *who* was inside his mother, forcing her to try to kill Rollan.

“Do I think that is creepy?” Mulop went on. “I do, in fact. And I am an octopus. Creeping is a specialty of mine. But controlling the minds of others? I vastly disapprove. Ah, Feliandor,” he added with a sigh, in what appeared to be a non sequitur, and suddenly fell silent again.

Conor exchanged a glance with Abeke. “Feliandor?” he prompted curiously. “Wasn’t that —”

“The true name of the last Devourer,” Meilin said, sounding horrified. She moved forward, the blue light reflecting off her smooth black hair. “Mulop, are you saying — was Feliandor controlled by the Bile? We were always taught that he started the war . . . but was Gerathon manipulating him the whole time?”

“Gerathon and Kovo,” Mulop answered. “It was Kovo’s idea. Oh, Kovo, I know about him. Clever brother, too clever, like me, but much more sinister. Take the young, ambitious king of Stetriol, offer him the world. Did I see that coming? I must admit I did not. A failure of vision, perhaps, but neither did you, right?” Mulop wagged a tentacle at Briggan like a scolding finger. “After all, who would have thought — who would *ever* have thought of giving that power to humans?” The octopus shuddered, sending ripples across the water.

“Feliandor was . . .” Rollan said. “That’s it! That’s what I saw in my dream on Nightshade Island! It was Kovo giving Feliandor the Bile — and then a real spirit animal came, and that’s what destroyed the place and left all those, uh —”

“Echoes,” Meilin finished for him. She reached out unconsciously and rested her hand on Jhi’s back.

“I thought the war was the Devourer’s idea, and Kovo and Gerathon were just helping him,” Conor said.

“Far from it,” Mulop said. “Kovo wanted to rule Erdas. Why? An excellent

question. What do you do with an entire world once you have it? What is the point? Once you are done conquering, will you be happy? Because my guess is no, and so is mine. Ruling, controlling, dominating, power, all these mysterious needs. Perhaps it's a mammal thing. We Great Beasts do more than guard our talismans, you know. Do you know? I know, but then, who knows what others know. We also guard the secret of the bond between humans and spirit animals. That is the source of power. That is what Kovo tried to use, and will try to use again, to become king of all Erdas."

"But he can't!" Abeke protested. "He's locked up, and Halawir is guarding him. Isn't his prison even stronger than Gerathon's? If the Conquerors could release him, wouldn't they have done it already?"

Mulop stirred the water with his tentacles, blinking slowly at her. "Oh, they will. Kovo will be free before long, as well. Am I delighted about that? No, I am not. It is a strong prison, yes. Don't we all know how dangerous Kovo is? Weren't we there when he killed you four? No one even knew a Great Beast could be killed, but there you were, my brave fallen friends, and he did that. He is more powerful and dangerous than any of us, so we made his prison strong, but nothing can withstand everything. What does it take to destroy Kovo's prison?" He flipped a tentacle at the Granite Ram around Abeke's neck. "Talismans. The combined power of many talismans."

The octopus's gaze shifted to Conor, who thought guiltily of the Iron Boar. Was that the new Devourer's plan? Was that why the Conquerors were stealing talismans — to set Kovo free? What if the Iron Boar was the talisman that made the difference and brought down Kovo's prison walls?

"How many talismans do they have?" Conor asked.

"You are collecting talismans too," said Mulop. "That is a thing I know and you know. But how many more await you? Very few still remain with their Great Beasts. Tellun's. Cabaro's. And mine."

Conor and Abeke both gasped. "That's it?" Conor cried. "The Conquerors have all the others?"

“I did not say that,” said Mulop cryptically. “But they control many, many things. You should perhaps hurry up and save the world. Here.” He dipped his tentacles down into the blue water and lifted out a dripping wet black cord. At the end of it dangled an octopus carved from pale orange-pink coral.

“The Coral Octopus,” Meilin said softly. She stumbled back and Rollan reached out to steady her. She brushed his hand away and rubbed her forehead with a confused, almost blank expression, her gaze fixed on the talisman.

“Isn’t this what you came for?” asked Mulop. “I know it is. I give it to you freely. You need it, to fight Kovo and the others. He must be stopped; that is a thing we all know.” His eyes somehow became stern. “Only you must not be careless and lose this one. I will know, and I will be very displeased, and so will I and also me.”

“We’ll be extremely careful,” Conor promised.

Mulop extended the dangling talisman toward them.

Who should take it? Conor wondered. He glanced at his friends. Who could be trusted? He wanted to say *all of them*, but he was afraid that wasn’t true. He wanted to let Abeke take it, just to show her he did trust her, but what if Meilin protested in front of Mulop and Mulop changed his mind about giving it to them?

Will they trust me with it, after what happened with the Iron Boar?

Rollan met his eyes and nodded, almost as if he knew what Conor was thinking. Abeke was watching the talisman, and Meilin shrugged, so Conor leaned forward and accepted it from Mulop’s outstretched tentacle.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “We really do need this.”

“I know and know and know,” the octopus said. “It’s a very useful talisman. With this, you can breathe underwater and become gelatinous, like me, to fit through small spaces. Am I proud of it? Oh, rather. But I have one request before you leave with it. Is that so? It is. What do I want? A demonstration of your bravery. I will worry less if I can see what you are made of, friends of the Fallen.”

Mulop shifted aside and indicated a part of the wall where the underwater light was brightest. “Down here is a hole that leads out to the ocean. It is about so big.” He held up three tentacles to indicate a triangular space the size of a small watermelon. “I ask that one of you use my talisman to swim through there, out to the sea. Show me that you are willing, and my worry will be a small bit smaller.”

“I’ll do it,” Conor said. Back into the water — he couldn’t exactly claim to be excited about that. But it wasn’t much for Mulop to ask in exchange for his talisman.

“Are you sure?” Abeke asked. “You’ll be all right swimming that far?”

He nodded. “I’m not a great swimmer, but I *can* swim.” He’d taught himself, more or less, like everyone did, in the ponds and rivers around Trunswick, where sometimes a sheep had to be rescued after a heavy rain. But splashing in a shallow stream with his brothers was not exactly the same as plunging into an entire vast ocean.

Don’t think about sharks. Do NOT think about sharks.

Conor slipped the Coral Octopus around his neck, taking a deep breath.

“Friend of Briggan,” Mulop said with a nod. He extended a tentacle for Briggan to sniff again. “Farewell, Pathfinder. I hope your destiny is brighter this time around.”

Briggan let out a howl that echoed eerily around the walls of the cavern. As the echoes faded, he turned and nudged Conor’s hand, then disappeared into his passive state.

“We’ll go get the Kingray and bring him around to pick you up,” Meilin said to Conor. She extended her hand briskly to Jhi.

Mulop stopped the panda with a gentle tentacle on one of her paws. “Old friend,” he said. “There is another thing I know. And I am sorry.”

Jhi shook her head, her silver eyes sad.

“What is it?” Meilin asked. “What do you mean?”

“It is a terrible thing,” Mulop said. His deep green eyes bored into Meilin’s.

“You will wish you had been kinder, little warrior.”

Meilin frowned, as though she wanted to argue but knew she shouldn't.

Mulop sank down into the water up to his eyes. “You'd better go, and quickly,” he said. “Time is short, ships are long, and enemies are many, and it is a great burden you bear, tiny humans.”

“Thank you again,” Abeke said. Uraza flashed into passive state as well, and she turned to climb up the rocks.

“Good luck, Conor,” Rollan said with a wave.

Conor sat on the edge of the rock and swung his legs into the glowing blue water. It felt warm with swirling currents of cold, and he could see far down into the depths of the grotto, where Mulop's tentacles coiled. There didn't seem to be a bottom; he felt like he might fall in and down and keep drifting for centuries.

He touched the Coral Octopus around his neck, took a deep breath, and plunged in.

The water closed over his head, cool and bubbling. His body immediately wanted to panic, to thrash and flail toward the air.

Trust the talisman. It was Mulop's voice and Tarik's voice and his own voice, all in his head, guiding him.

He forced himself to breathe in, even though his lungs were screaming, *No, it's water, you're going to die!*

One breath. Two breaths. No different from breathing air, after all, although a part of him still rebelled at the sensation of water whooshing through his nose, his lungs, his mouth. Three breaths, four breaths, and it got a bit easier. His mind adjusted to the strangeness, and suddenly it was normal.

Well, perhaps not *normal*, exactly — he was underwater, but for once he didn't have to fear it. He couldn't drown, not with the Coral Octopus on. He could swim this way through the whole ocean, if he wanted to (as long as he avoided any *don't think about sharks*), and he'd never have to worry about the water closing over his head and dragging him down.

I wonder if I could even sleep underwater, he thought, a little giddily. His

grandfather used to tell tales of water spirits that lived in lakes or rivers. *Now I could practically be one of them!*

Mulop's enormous bulk floated beside him, and Conor could see one tentacle pointing toward the exit, where a small beam of blue sunlight shone through. He paddled and kicked as hard as he could, wishing he were a better swimmer. He felt awkward and floppy next to Mulop's natural underwater grace.

Finally he reached the hole and grabbed the edges with his hands. The wall was rough, scraping his fingers, and the space was even smaller than he'd expected. It was an appalling prospect, wedging himself into such a tiny hole. His shoulders would never normally fit through there — but hopefully with the Coral Octopus they would.

What if the talisman didn't work as promised, though? What if he got halfway through and got *stuck* there, like a sheep trapped and waiting to be sheared?

He had to take a deep breath. The salty seawater burned the inside of his nose and his chest felt soggy heavy. If only the talisman gave one the grace of an octopus as well as its . . . squishiness.

As long as it does give me squishiness, I won't complain, Conor thought.

He had to stop worrying and just go.

Another breath, and then he drove his arms through first as though he were diving into the sunlit ocean outside. His head and shoulders stuck for a heart-stopping moment in the gap, and then his bones seemed to melt and squash together, and all at once he was squeezing through the hole like a sack of beans . . . or like an octopus.

Conor shoved himself free from the hole and felt his body go solid again. He was drifting in a wide blue emptiness with dazzling sunlight far above him. A small silver fish flashed by, then flashed back to peer at him curiously, then flashed away again. A few yards away, a giant turtle lazily swam past without giving him a second look.

I did it! We have Mulop's talisman!

Conor kicked vigorously, powering himself up to the surface as triumph flooded through him. For once, a Great Beast had been on their side; for once, things had gone as well as they possibly could. Maybe this was a sign that their luck was changing. Maybe they were close to stopping the Devourer. Maybe it could still happen before Kovo escaped his prison.

Conor's head broke the surface of the water and he sucked in a breath of real air. A cliff soared away over his head, with seagulls and hawks circling far up in the sky. Waves tugged him toward the rocks at the base of the cliff, and he had to kick and paddle just to stay where he was.

He twisted around, looking for the Kingray.

That's when he saw the ships.

There had to be at least a hundred of them, filling the sea to the horizons. As far as Conor could see, the entire island was surrounded. No giant stingray would be getting past this blockade, not with four kids on top of it.

They were trapped. Somehow the Conquerors had found them again.

I have to get back and warn the others.

But before Conor could move — before he could swim back to the cavern or even yell a warning — he suddenly felt something rubbery and slippery slither around his ankle. He had barely a moment to look down and see the long orange tentacles of Mulop, reaching up to drag him under.

And then the octopus yanked him down, down, down into the dark, bubbling depths of the sea.



15

BATTLE

ABEKE LOOKED DOWN FROM A LEDGE HIGH UP THE CAVERN wall and saw that Mulop and Conor had both vanished from the grotto. Dark ink was spreading through the clear blue water, hiding anything below it. She hoped Conor would be all right. She wondered if she should have volunteered instead.

The Granite Ram thumped against her chest as she leaped to the next rock, then the next. It was almost like flying, to feel so sure on her feet and be able to jump so far. In the space of a few breaths, she'd reached the top. She hauled herself onto the flat stone and collapsed there for a moment, feeling the sun on her face.

“Grrawk!”

Abeke opened her eyes and saw Essix beside her. The gyrfalcon peered meaningfully down into her face and blinked.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, sitting up. She pulled the Granite Ram over her head and handed it to Essix, who flew down into the hole to take it to Rollan.

Abeke stood up and stretched — and then froze.

“Rollan!” she shouted. “Meilin! Get up here, hurry!”

“Working on it,” Rollan called.

“What’s wrong?” came Meilin’s voice.

“We’re surrounded by Conquerors!” Abeke called back, her voice shaking. She pivoted, scanning the ocean. It was true; there were ships all around the island, each one swarming with people and animals.

How? her mind screamed. *How? How? How did they find us AGAIN?*

Pebbles cascaded below her, and Rollan’s hand appeared. Abeke reached down and helped to drag him up beside her.

“See?” she said, pointing.

Rollan bent over, gasping for breath, and handed the Granite Ram to Essix again. A few moments later, Meilin scrambled up next to them. Ignoring Abeke’s outstretched hand, she stood up and immediately began studying the ships, shading her eyes with one hand.

“How did they find us?” Rollan asked. “How do they *always* find us?”

“We already know the answer to that,” Meilin pointed out. Her face was grim, and she didn’t look at Abeke.

“All right, I know my mother said there was a mole,” Rollan said. “But this was so fast! How could any of us have sent a message when we’ve all been together this whole time? On a stingray and then in Mulop’s grotto? And none of us knew where we were going!”

“It’s not even *possible*,” Abeke said numbly. “There must be some other explanation, like something followed us, maybe —”

“Essix would have warned me if we were being followed,” Rollan protested. “This makes no sense.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it now,” Meilin retorted. “We have to get out of here.”

“And we have to get Conor,” Abeke interjected. *He must be terrified, floating out there in the sea with Conquerors’ ships all around him.*

“Of course,” Meilin said. She started down the rocky path to the beach. Abeke and Rollan followed as fast as they could, slipping and sliding on the loose rocks. There were scrubby bushes here and there, clinging to the patches of

dirt, and Abeke found herself catching on to them whenever her feet slipped out from under her. The sunlight suddenly seemed unbearably hot, like the glare of ten thousand Conquerors' eyes watching them.

Below her, Meilin abruptly stopped, several yards above the beach. "Uh-oh," she murmured.

Three boats were just landing on the sand below them. As they watched, Conquerors began jumping out into the water and hauling the boats up onto the land. Their escape route was completely cut off.

Worse than that, they could see the entire blue bay from where they were — and there was no Kingray in sight.

"Did it just *leave* us?" Meilin hissed, staring down at the water.

"It was probably scared by all the ships arriving," Abeke said. "Or maybe it doesn't know anything about good and bad; maybe it figured now we'd have plenty of boats to carry us off the island."

"This is true," Meilin said. "Plenty of boats to carry us straight to Stetriol and into the hands of the Devourer. Aren't we lucky?"

Abeke spotted a head of blond hair among the Conquerors moving below. A gasp escaped her before she could stop herself. *Shane! Shane is here!* Next to him she saw Zerif, right before Zerif looked up and spotted her.

For a chilling moment their eyes met, and then he yelled something to the Conquerors around him. They all turned to look up at the three kids on the cliff slope.

"That's not good," said Rollan.

With a shout of triumph, several Conquerors came racing up the beach toward them.

"Up, up, up!" Meilin cried. She drew her quarterstaff and released Jhi at the same time. "We'll have an advantage from the top of the cliff. Abeke, take the Granite Ram!"

Startled, Abeke reached out and caught the talisman as Meilin tossed it to her.

"Get as high as you can and use your bow," Meilin ordered. "Go! Now!"

Abeke didn't argue. She slipped the ram over her neck and released Uraza, then leaped rapidly from boulder to boulder up the slope. As she jumped, she pulled out her bow, and when she reached a flat spot, she whirled and fired down into the mass of Conquerors below.

She could see at once that the enemy had planned ahead for this attack, at least in choosing which spirit animals would come over in the boats to the island. Most of the animals swarming rapidly up the rocks were monkeys and apes, perfectly suited to climbing. Long-armed gibbons clambered after macaques with enormous teeth. A pair of baboons shrieked furiously, and three monkeys Abeke had no name for were advancing relentlessly up the steepest part of the cliff, their faces strange and dark. They were all unnaturally big and angry.

Abeke aimed at one with matted fur and blazing eyes as it scurried toward Rollan. Her arrow sent it flying backward off the cliff with an unearthly scream. Another arrow thudded through one of the baboons; her third narrowly missed a snarling chimpanzee.

Not far below her, Uraza was grappling with a huge doglike creature that Abeke thought might be a dingo. The leopard had her jaws locked around its neck while it thrashed and clawed at her.

Jhi had retreated up the rocks, but Meilin was clearly using her heightened senses as she fought. She looked like a blur of motion, swinging her quarterstaff to knock aside enemies and in the next moment launching a flurry of kicks to drive them back. It was supernatural how fast she was moving.

Scanning the attackers, Abeke spotted a black shape scrambling up the rocks toward Jhi. It looked like a bear, but with a bright yellow arc of fur on its chest. A sun bear, if she remembered correctly from the books of animals Tarik had shown her on the ship. It growled at Jhi, flexing long, cruel-looking claws.

There was no time for Meilin to get to Jhi to protect her. Abeke whipped her bow around and launched an arrow straight into the sun bear's distinctive markings. It roared furiously and toppled off the rocks.

She felt a small glow of satisfaction, but it flared out quickly. There were so many Conquerors — so many Bile-enslaved animals. How could Abeke, Rollan, and Meilin possibly fight them all off and escape, especially without the Kingray? And what about Conor, floundering out in the ocean, waiting for them to come get him? Would he be all right, or would the Conquerors grab him too? What if they had more of their deadly sharks in the water?

Maybe we should surrender, she thought hopelessly. *If I could talk to Shane — maybe he'd even let us go. At least he'd save Conor. And he'd make sure our spirit animals stay safe.* She thought so, at least. She couldn't see where he'd disappeared to in the chaos of people below.

But that would put three more talismans in the Devourer's hands. Would that be enough to free Kovo? Would that mean the end of Erdas as they knew it?

A yowl of beastly fury dragged Abeke's attention back to the battle. She fired three more arrows in quick succession at a tiger, a hyena, and another giant monkey, missing one but hitting the other two. She felt for another arrow and realized she'd be out soon.

I need to make these really count.

She narrowed her eyes, searching the horde of people below.

There he is.

Zerif.

He'd lied to her; he'd tried to turn her evil. Zerif was the leader, or at least *a* leader of the Conquerors. Maybe if she could take him down, they'd fall back and give up — or at least be confused enough that Abeke and her friends might have a chance of escaping.

She drew her bow back and aimed, trying to ignore her thudding heart. The man stood on an outcropping, shouting orders at the fighters scrambling up behind him. Her sharp arrow tip was pointed directly down at Zerif's heart.

It was one thing to shoot gibbons and tigers — but deliberately aiming at someone she knew, someone she had spoken to . . . Wouldn't that make her as

evil as any of them? She shivered, and then tightened her arm muscles, trying to turn herself to stone. *I have to. It's the only way to stop them. Even if it's wrong.*

And then Meilin will know I'm truly a Greencloak.

She took another deep breath, stilling the tremors running along her arms. And then, strong as a lion, fierce as a leopard, brave as a warrior, cold as a glacier — she fired the hardest shot she'd ever taken. The arrow took a little bit of her with it.

It struck Zerif right in the chest, exactly where his malevolent heart beat.

And bounced off.

Abeke gasped. *That's impossible!* She knew her aim had been straight and true. It should have killed him instantly.

Zerif turned slowly, rubbing his chest as if he'd been pinged with a button. He glanced down at the arrow. A gloating smile spread across his face, and he raised his eyes to meet Abeke's.

She watched numbly as he reached into the collar of his shirt and held up something that gleamed dully in the sunshine.

The Iron Boar.

That's what it does, she realized with anguish. The Iron Boar — it must make your skin as tough and leathery as a boar's hide, like a kind of invisible armor. My arrows will never pierce it. Zerif is indestructible right now.

Zerif tucked the Iron Boar back into his shirt, still grinning smugly. Abeke wanted to smash something. Ideally his face.

Instead she whipped more arrows out and shot the closest three creatures, one after the other in a furious whirl. The front line of attackers fell back for a moment, and Rollan seized the chance to climb higher, toward Abeke.

"I know how we can get off this island!" he shouted to her.

"Look out!" Meilin cried.

Rollan staggered sideways as if he'd been punched by the air, and then crashed forward into the rock wall. Abeke spotted nearly invisible ripples in the air around him and realized someone was using the Crystal Polar Bear.

She scanned the mass of attackers until she spotted the woman with the talisman. It was the massive woman from Sunlight Island, the one who'd been bonded to the Komodo dragon. She had a look of pure hatred on her face, and she stood on a ledge not far from Rollan with the Crystal Polar Bear glittering around her neck. Her arm swept out and Rollan was nearly knocked down the cliff, but at the last moment his hand shot out and caught on to one of the ragged bushes.

Before the woman could strike again, Meilin's knife skewered her hand and she screamed with pain and anger. A heartbeat later, Essix dropped from the sky and drove her talons and beak at the Conqueror's face. The woman fled back down the cliff, arms over her head.

"Quick, Rollan!" Abeke called. She leaped down to him, light as the wind, and dragged him up onto solid ground. Meilin was not far behind, and they all scrambled up the rock face together.

"I know what to do," Rollan said again, wiping sweat from his forehead. "At least, I hope it's an option. Abeke, do you have the Slate Elephant?"

She couldn't believe she'd forgotten something so important. Kalani had handed it back to her before swimming away with Katoa. Abeke dug into her pocket, trying not to meet the hard stare coming from Meilin's eyes, and handed the elephant to Rollan.

"Thank all the Great Beasts," Rollan said with immense relief. "Except for the bad two, I mean. Essix!"

"We can fly away!" Abeke cried. "That's brilliant!"

"Why didn't you think of it sooner?" Meilin demanded. She held out her arm. "Jhi, come quickly." The panda scrambled over, paused for a moment with an odd, heartbroken look in her silver eyes, and then vanished into the tattoo on Meilin's hand.

Abeke glanced anxiously down the slope and saw Uraza pin a giant owl under her claws. The leopard looked up, sensing Abeke's attention. She swatted the owl away and came bounding up the rocks toward them.

“We’re going to fly,” Abeke told her, holding out her arm. “My guess is you’d like this even less than being on a boat.”

Uraza growled in agreement, lashing her tail. She turned her violet gaze on the Conquerors climbing toward them and apparently decided they had enough time to escape. A moment later, she had also disappeared into passive state.

By then Essix was swooping down. Rollan climbed up toward her, clutching the elephant talisman.

“We can do this,” Abeke said to Meilin, nearly falling over with relief. “Essix can take us down to pick up Conor and then we can really get away, with the talismans and everything.”

Meilin had her head turned away, toward the Conquerors. She didn’t answer for a moment, but when she turned back to Abeke, there was a strange blank expression on her face.

And her eyes were yellow.

“I’m afraid you and I are not going anywhere,” she said to Abeke. “We have an appointment with the Reptile King.”

BETRAYAL

ONE MOMENT, MEILIN WAS FIGHTING.

Time had slowed down and she was flowing between moments, striking out with her staff one way, blocking an attack from the other direction, kicking a chimpanzee back into his Conqueror. She was in control of everything. She felt like she could almost steer the wind to do what she wanted. She could take down every enemy on the island single-handedly, if she chose to.

And then, as she climbed up toward Abeke and Rollan, she felt her eyesight blur for a moment. She hesitated, blinking — and her hand began to move by itself.

Shocked, Meilin tried to freeze in place.

But her feet betrayed her, taking another step, and another, closer and closer to her friends.

What is happening? Meilin could only watch in horror. She wanted to scream, but even her voice wasn't hers anymore. It felt like her blood had turned into something alien, slithering around chillingly inside her. She was trapped in her own body, helpless, as it scrambled up the last few boulders and stood beside Abeke.

As if from a long way away, she heard Abeke say, “We can really get away, with the talismans and everything.”

Not so fassssst, said another voice in Meilin’s head — not her own. *Someone else is in my head!* She needed to shout a warning to the others, but something else was coming out of her mouth. Cold, dangerous words. Words of betrayal and darkness. “An appointment with the Reptile King.” *What does that mean?*

How is this happening?

Rollan! Rollan, pay attention! Stop me!

But Rollan was focused on Essix, who couldn’t land where they were if she was going to get bigger. He was ascending away from them, to a higher, clear spot where they could climb aboard the falcon and escape.

Except nobody is escaping today.

Her hand — her disloyal, traitorous hand — shot out and grabbed Abeke’s arm, fingers pressing into Uraza’s mark.

“Come with me,” she heard her voice growl. “If you release Uraza, she will be dead before you can take another breath.”

“Meilin!” Abeke cried. “What are you doing?” She tried to struggle, but Meilin’s grip was too strong. “Rollan!” she screamed.

Rollan finally, finally turned to look at them.

His face — Meilin knew she would have nightmares about his face forever. She could see as clear as day the moment when he realized that Meilin was betraying them.

But it’s not me, she tried to shout. *I would never do this!*

And yet at the same time she was dragging Abeke down the slope toward the Conquerors. Abeke was taller, but Meilin knew ways of holding people that made it almost impossible for her to break free.

“Meilin!” Rollan shouted. “Stop! What are you —”

He must have figured it out at the same time that she did.

Bile. Someone gave me Bile instead of Nectar at my ceremony. And now Gerathon can control me.

Worse: She'd been able to control Meilin this whole time. She'd seen through her eyes, knew everything she knew.

It's me. I'm the mole.

Her insides felt like they were splintering apart, crashing down like the walls of Jano Rion.

She had a sudden, ghastly memory of her father's death and his last words to her as his blood stained the grass of the battlefield near Dinesh's temple.

Should have told you . . . betrayed . . . the Bile.

Did he know?

She remembered how convinced, how *certain* he had been that she would call a spirit animal on the day of her Nectar Ceremony.

That led to a thought she couldn't bear, so awful it was like having her heart ripped out by the Devourer's crocodile.

Did my father do this to me?

Rollan raced down the rocks toward them, sliding and scattering pebbles in his haste.

"Stay back!" Meilin-but-not-Meilin yelled. She flipped Abeke around in front of her and pressed a knife to her throat.

No, no, no, the real Meilin sobbed inside herself.

Rollan froze, several paces away but close enough to see her eyes.

"Meilin," he called. Pain was carved all over his face. Meilin knew he must be thinking of his mother, and how he'd been facing her and the same evil yellow eyes only a short time ago. "Listen to me. I know you're still in there. You can fight this! You're the strongest person I — the strongest person maybe *ever*. You can fight her!"

Meilin didn't think that was true. What chance did she have against a Great Beast and her magic? But she tried. She dug mental claws into the sides of her brain and shoved, trying to force her way out and back into control of her own body.

Her feet wavered underneath her, and her grip on Abeke loosened. The

Niloan girl suddenly twisted under Meilin's arm and jerked free. She bolted three steps up the slope toward Rollan.

And then Meilin's quarterstaff came down on her head with a heart-stopping crack.

Abeke collapsed to the ground like a doll.

Meilin stared at her body, horrified. *I hope she's only unconscious.*

"Abeke!" Meilin's real voice struggled out and was crushed in almost the same breath. "There is no one who can fight me," she snarled at Rollan. She advanced to stand over Abeke's fallen body. "Certainly not your precious Meilin, who's been my puppet from the moment she summoned Jhi."

The sleepwalking, Meilin realized. Every time I blacked out, that was Gerathon taking control of my body.

Which meant she could take control without Meilin even knowing it. And that also meant she *did* want Meilin to know it now. She wanted Meilin to suffer through the betrayal of her friends and be aware of every moment of it.

Meilin felt her mouth being forced into a cruel smile. Her voice had an unnatural hiss to it as Gerathon spoke to Rollan again. "Didn't you ever wonder about how easily she controls that panda? Their bond is a Bile bond. Jhi has no choice but to obey her."

Inside herself, Meilin wanted to curl up and die. The way she ordered Jhi around — the way Jhi always tried so hard to do as she was asked — now it was painfully clear, horribly wrong. She'd thought she was so great, such a natural leader that of course Jhi would follow her. She'd mocked the others for having trouble with their spirit animals. She'd assumed that was just another way she was superior, as with her fighting skills.

But it was all a lie. Their connection was forced, not a true bond. Jhi was being controlled by Meilin exactly the way Meilin was being controlled by Gerathon right now.

She felt like throwing up, but she couldn't even move.

My poor Jhi. I'm so sorry. Is this what it always felt like, being with me? Did

you feel trapped and enslaved? Do you hate me?

She remembered Mulop's words to Jhi. *He must have known. Seems like that would have been one of the more useful warnings to pass along, octopus.*

Her body was bending and lifting Abeke against her will. She dragged the taller girl up to a sitting position, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the flash of something gray around her neck.

The talisman! Meilin thought. *NO. They can't have me and Abeke and the Granite Ram too.*

With all the will she had left in the world, she shoved outward as if she were forcing herself through an invisible hedge. Stabbing, scratching pain seared through her, but she seized control of one hand — that's all she needed, just one arm — ripped the cord off Abeke's neck, and threw it as hard as she could at Rollan.

"Get out of here!" she screamed while she still could.

Shocked, he fumbled to catch the talisman and then took a step back. But his haunted eyes were still on her face. "No, Meilin. We can get you away from here. We can *help you!*"

"You know you can't," she answered, the one thing both she and Gerathon agreed on. It wasn't safe for her to be anywhere near Rollan or the talismans or the Greencloaks. The Great Serpent could control her at any moment, could spy on them whenever she wanted to. Meilin had to give herself to the Conquerors to protect her friends.

She let go of the last bit of resistance and stepped back.

But apparently now Gerathon had decided she wanted them all. Meilin found her body dropping Abeke and then running up the rocks toward Rollan, knives out and ready to attack.

"I'm not abandoning you!" Rollan shouted, his face going hard.

He tackled her to the ground, knocking the knives away, and they wrestled in the dirt, kicking and twisting. But Meilin was better trained, faster, more wily. In

moments, she was able to flip him over and pin him to the ground. She felt herself drawing another knife from her boot.

Rollan, Rollan, please run. Please get away from here. Take your talismans and fly.

He knew what a skilled fighter she was. He didn't stand a chance against her. Meilin flung herself against the walls of the prison around her mind, screaming and kicking. For a moment her hands paused, and in that moment Rollan was able to throw her off and squirm free.

And then he did run, and he didn't look back.

Gerathon wanted to chase him, Meilin could feel it. But Rollan threw the Granite Ram around his neck and leaped away with all the speed and grace of Arax the Ram. On the cliff top, Essix was waiting; it would only take a moment for Rollan to switch talismans, climb on board, and escape.

Gerathon hissed through Meilin's teeth, then turned and kicked Abeke in the side. "At least we have these two," she growled. With unnatural strength, Meilin crouched and threw Abeke over her shoulder.



The Conquerors were waiting for them. Someone took Abeke from Meilin as she stepped down the rocky path. Her feet propelled her onto the once-beautiful white sand of the beach, now trampled by a thousand paws and marred with blotches of blood.

Zerif stood by one of the boats with his jackal beside him, smirking. He gave Meilin a small, ironic bow as she walked up to him.

"Nice of you to join us at last," he said. "Of course, you've been terribly useful on the other side. We all appreciate that. But now that we have so many talismans, it's time for you to stand by the Reptile King, where you belong."

Something in her face made him pause. He tugged on his beard, frowning.

"You did bring a talisman, didn't you? The Coral Octopus, I hope? Or the Granite Ram would do. I can see you don't have the Slate Elephant."

Meilin turned and followed his gaze to the sky, where the enormous shape of Essix was winging away to the north. Rollan was just a small dark blur, crouched on the falcon's back.

"No talismans," Gerathon said harshly in Meilin's voice. "But we have Jhi and Uraza, and Tellun remains hidden. The only talisman left for them to find is Cabaro's. Our plan is nearly complete. Kovo will be free soon, and then your Reptile King's armies will lay waste to the last rebellious corners of Erdas."

Meilin spotted Shane hovering over the next boat as Abeke was lifted inside. Shackles were snapped over Abeke's wrists and ankles.

"Careful, be gentle," Shane protested, sounding guilty.

Meilin automatically began to raise her arms, ready for her own shackles.

In her head, Gerathon started laughing. *You don't need shackles, drinker of the Bile*, the serpent's voice hissed. *You're my creature. Try to resist all you like, but in the end, I control you completely.*

Despair washed over her. She stepped into the boat beside Zerif and watched Mulop's island grow smaller and smaller as they rowed toward the Conquerors' ships. Gerathon could keep her eyes open, could point them in any direction she chose, but she couldn't stop the tears that slowly rolled down Meilin's face.

I'm the mole. Not Abeke. Not anyone else. Me.

I'm the reason the Conquerors are winning the war. I'm the reason they've always been able to find us; it's my fault they have the talismans they stole from us.

It's my fault my father is dead.

And now that I know Gerathon can control me . . . it's as though there's no Meilin left at all.

GONE

ROLLAN CIRCLED OVER THE OCEAN AND THE FLEET OF SHIPS for as long as he dared, but he saw no sign of Conor in the water, even with his falcon-enhanced sight.

Please let him be all right. Don't let him be lost too.

He couldn't have drowned with the Coral Octopus on . . . could he? Had one of the Conquerors' ships picked him up? Or something worse . . . Rollan could see the menacing fins of Bile-enhanced sharks lurking between the ships. He wouldn't let his imagination go any further in that direction.

Rollan didn't want to leave him. He didn't want to leave Meilin or Abeke either, but how could he get anywhere near Zerif's ship?

What can I do? Of all of us to get away . . . I'm the most useless.

Finally one of the Conquerors' arrows came too close, and he was forced to tell Essix to fly away. He didn't want to risk losing her too, and he could feel the weight of the talismans he carried, one around his neck and one in his pocket. The only thing left that he could do was take those talismans to safety.

Sick at heart, he leaned into Essix's warm feathers, feeling her muscles contract and lengthen below him as she flew. The cold wind whipped away the

tears on his cheeks.

It seemed like a long time later when he felt Essix tilt her wings to descend. He looked up and realized that the sun was setting. Golden light spilled across the rippling sea. The sky was streaked with blazes of pink and orange.

It was the most beautiful and the saddest sunset he'd ever seen.

Essix soared down toward the *Tellun's Pride*, now anchored off a small deserted island. Tarik must have ordered the ship to move so he wouldn't come into contact with Kalani's people — protecting them from *tapu* again. The huge shapes of the rockback whales loomed beside the ship, as big as islands themselves.

As the giant falcon spiraled down toward the deck, the sailors on board began shouting and pointing. Rollan spotted Tarik's familiar green cloak as the man climbed onto the deck. Tarik shaded his face to look up at Rollan and waved, and Rollan was startled to feel more tears pricking at the backs of his eyes. He leaned forward, too defeated to wave back.

There wasn't enough room for Essix to land on the ship without getting tangled in the masts, so she swooped close enough to hover while Rollan swung himself into the rigging. As soon as he was secure, he took off the Slate Elephant and climbed down to where Tarik was waiting.

The Greencloak's face was openly relieved, until he saw Rollan's expression.

"What happened?" he asked, panic creeping into his voice. He reached up unconsciously to stroke Lumeo's back, worry lines creasing his forehead.

"Where are the others? Rollan?" He caught Rollan as the boy staggered away from the ropes. "*Where are the others?*"

"I lost them," Rollan said. His legs gave up on standing and he crumpled to the deck. He buried his face in his hands, leaning against his knees. "Tarik, Meilin was the mole. She took Abeke. The Conquerors have them both now." He looked up into Tarik's shocked eyes. "She — she's being controlled by Gerathon. Somebody gave her the *Bile*." A flood of anger washed over him. "Somebody gave her the *Bile*, Tarik!" he yelled. "How could that happen? It

must have been at her Nectar Ceremony. Who could have done that? Why didn't the Greencloaks protect her?"

Tarik crouched beside him and put one hand on Rollan's shoulder. "Rollan, if Meilin was being controlled by Gerathon, I'm sure there was nothing you could have done to save her or Abeke. This isn't your fault."

"I know that!" Rollan shouted, shaking him off. "It's the Greencloaks' fault for letting her drink the Bile in the first place!"

Tarik rubbed his face with his hands, looking far older than he was. "Where's Conor?"

"He had the Coral Octopus," Rollan mumbled, dropping his head again. "He swam into the sea and then — I don't know. I couldn't find him. There were too many Conquerors and he wasn't anywhere. . . ."

"We'll go back and find him," Tarik promised. "Lenori may be able to sense Briggan, or ask for a vision, or —"

"That won't be necessary," said a tired voice.

They both whirled around and saw Conor climbing over the rail, dripping wet.

"Conor!" Rollan cried. He wasn't sure he'd ever been so happy to see someone. He scrambled to his feet and nearly toppled the boy over as he hugged him. "How did you get away? How did you get *here*?"

"It was Mulop," Conor said, looking more than a little embarrassed. "He followed me out through the hole, grabbed me, and dragged me under the Conquerors' ships. It took me a while to realize he wasn't, like, taking me off to eat me or something. He just wanted to make sure the Coral Octopus was safe." Conor touched the talisman around his neck. "We traveled underwater most of the way here." He shivered. A puddle had already formed around his feet.

Tarik pulled off his own cloak to put around Conor's shoulders. He paused for a moment, gave Conor a fierce hug of his own, and then went to get dry clothes and towels.

"I'm glad you guys are safe too," Conor said to Rollan while they waited. "I

was really worried about you, but Mulop wouldn't go back. He said, 'I won't risk the Coral Octopus falling into the wrong tentacles, and neither will I.' I think maybe he knew the ships were out there and set up the whole test so he could follow me out through the hole and get at least one of us to safety with his talisman. I'm sorry it was me, though; I wish I could have stayed to help you guys. Did you use the Slate Elephant on Essix? That's what I was think — Rollan? What is it? What's wrong?"

Rollan shook his head, took a deep breath, and told Conor everything about the battle and the truth about Meilin.

Conor stared at him in disbelief, his green eyes wide and confused. After a moment, he held out his arm and Briggan appeared. Conor crouched beside the wolf, wrapped his arm around Briggan's neck, and leaned into his fur. Briggan licked Conor's hand and made a soft whining sound.

"Poor Meilin," Conor whispered.

"It's not right," Rollan said furiously. "The Bile is — it's unnatural and wrong and . . . and awful. No one should be able to control people that way. And Meilin must have been *tricked* into drinking it, which makes it even worse. . . ."

"Even worse than your mom," Conor finished the thought.

Rollan was trying really hard not to think about his mom. He was trying not to remember those same serpentine yellow eyes looking out of Aidana's and Meilin's faces. That same malevolent presence forcing people he cared about to try to kill him. The same struggle he'd seen on both faces, as Aidana and Meilin both tried so desperately to break free and save him.

Tarik returned with blankets for both of them. Darkness was spreading over the ship, and stars were beginning to emerge one by one in the purple sky.

"What do we do now?" Conor asked Tarik. The three of them stood at the railing, watching the Hundred Isles slip past them. "Can we rescue Abeke? Is there anything we can do to . . . to fix Meilin?"

"I don't know," Tarik said heavily.

"There must be," Rollan said, digging his nails into the wood. "There *must* be

a way to reverse the effects of the Bile.”

“If there is, we’ll find it,” Conor agreed. With a stab of anguish, Rollan remembered Meilin saying almost those exact words.

Essix landed on the railing and sidled up beside Rollan. She eyed him thoughtfully for a moment, then hopped onto his shoulder and tugged on a lock of his hair.

“At least we have the Coral Octopus,” Tarik murmured, but from the tone of his voice Rollan knew they felt the same way.

The talisman wasn’t worth it. No talisman could be worth the price that Oceanus had exacted from them.

Meilin and Abeke were in the hands of the Devourer.

And according to Mulop, Kovo would soon be free.

Rollan stared bleakly down at the black ocean.

Was there any hope left for Erdas?

Tui T. Sutherland is a *Jeopardy!* champion and the author of the dragon series Wings of Fire, the Menagerie trilogy, the Pet Trouble series, and three books in the bestselling Seekers series (as part of the Erin Hunter team). Right now she has just one dog (clearly her spirit animal, Sunshine), but growing up she had, at various times, piglets in the bathtub, shrieking monkeys in the backyard, and a kitten with super-villain plans. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband, two sons, and Sunshine.

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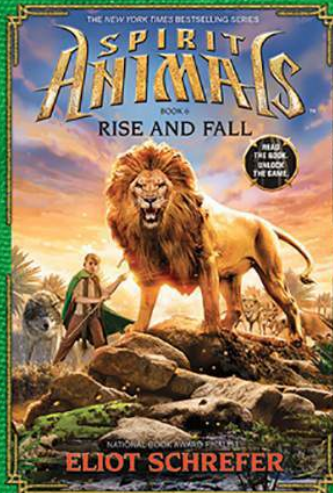
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Book Six

Rise and Fall

By Eliot Schrefer



PRISONERS

THUD!
Abeke startled awake, shivering. At first she thought she'd dreamed the noise. Then she heard it again.

THUD!

Abeke leaped, nearly knocking her skull against the ceiling. The chain fastened to her ankle slammed against Meilin, waking her.

"What is it?" Meilin asked sluggishly, groping in the dark.

Abeke groggily remembered where they were: still imprisoned in the brig of a ship, on their way to the Conqueror camp in southern Nilo. Abeke had once before found herself on a Conqueror ship just like this one — only on that journey she'd been a guest of honor. She'd had a feather bed, a mirror framed in gold, and had been allowed to roam wherever she liked. She hadn't been locked in the brig, a tiny, lightless, reinforced closet deep in the depths of the ship, where the shrieking of the ship's timbers joined the skittering of the rats.

To make their imprisonment complete, Abeke and Meilin were chained together at the ankles with heavy links of iron.

"Voices," Abeke whispered urgently. "Someone's coming. Get up!"

Meilin eased gracefully to her feet, managing to stay noiseless even with the heavy chain linking her ankle to Abeke's. She might be shackled and broken, but she still had the reflexes of a warrior.

The candlelight that leaked in would have been dim in any other circumstance, but after days in near darkness, Abeke was dazzled. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw a boy in the doorway. He was tall and well built, with pale skin and soft, apologetic eyes. Shane.

Though she held no love for any of the Conquerors, Abeke knew Shane was the closest they had to an ally. Throughout their long boat journey, he'd been the only one to bring them food to eat and fresh water to drink. They'd have died without him.

Abeke could sense the fury coming off Meilin in waves, but her friend held silent. This was Abeke's relationship to navigate.

"Are you two okay?" Shane asked. His tone was gentle, but Abeke was well aware of the saber glinting at the boy's waist, of the power Shane had over them. He was still one of their captors. And Shane was capable of summoning his own ferocious spirit animal, a wolverine. Abeke was confident her leopard, Uraza, could best the creature in normal circumstances, but wolverines were perfectly suited to fighting in close quarters, and Uraza was not.

"We're as good as can be expected," Abeke said curtly, conspicuously rattling their chain.

"I'm truly sorry about that," Shane said, sighing. "I told them there was no need for shackles." He broke off, staring at the ceiling. Scraping sounds came from above. "Your time in the hold is over, anyway. We've arrived at our stronghold."

Abeke narrowed her eyes. Was he expecting her to be relieved? She had no fondness for the brig, but knew that whatever awaited in the Conqueror base was worse. Were they planning to sacrifice Abeke and Meilin to Gerathon, the Great Serpent? Or force Abeke to drink the awful Bile, so she'd be a puppet the Great Beast could control at will, like Meilin?

Abeke struggled to keep her composure, but when she thought of that day at Mulop's grotto, frightening images passed through her mind: Meilin's fingers tight on her arm, digging to the bone as she cruelly hauled her down to the rocky beach. Fighting to get free, only to see Meilin's quarterstaff come smashing down hard against her skull. The world fading from view. . . .

"Our stronghold?" Abeke said, swallowing back the memory. "Whose was it before the Conquerors took it over?"

"It's a palace of one of the lords of the Niloan steppes," Shane said with a sigh. "Listen, I'm not proud that we've taken over someone's home. The lord is still alive, and I'm doing my best to make sure the Niloans who work and live here are kept safe and have enough to eat. I'm trying to make the best of this situation."

Abeke crossed her arms and frowned at him.

"Please come easily with me now, Abeke," Shane said, eyes downcast. "For your sake, and Meilin's."

Abeke glanced at Meilin, who nodded imperceptibly. If Shane was the closest they had to an ally, best to keep him on their side while they got as much information as they could.

"Yes," Abeke said. "We'll submit, Shane. Lead the way."

The ship's ladder was difficult to navigate with chained ankles. Abeke went up a rung, waited until Meilin was right behind her, then took another step. Finally they broke outside. It was overcast, at least, but still the light was blinding. The moment she hit daylight Abeke had to scrunch her eyes shut, tears streaming down her face.

Shane was there waiting, and with strong hands pulled Abeke and Meilin from the last rung so they were sitting on the deck.

Only slowly did Abeke's eyes adjust. The moment they did, she gasped.

On deck was a score of Conquerors, loading up a skiff to head to shore. The soldiers wore a uniform of simple leather armor, with breastplates rubbed black with oil. This armor wasn't ceremonial. It was made for unencumbered fighting.

It's for fighting Niloans, Abeke thought bitterly. Fighting people who are defending their homes.

Zerif was there, not a foot away, the man who had once tricked Abeke into thinking she was joining the side of good. He still had the same handsome, severely lined face and tight-cropped beard. Beside him was a slender woman Abeke hadn't seen since her time in the North: Aidana, Rollan's mother. Though she was unchained, she looked a bit like a prisoner herself, with a gaunt face and exhausted eyes. For the first time, Abeke was relieved that Rollan wasn't near; seeing his mother in such a wretched state might have destroyed him.

That wasn't all, though. Next to Aidana was a girl Abeke didn't recognize. She was tall and pale, with large eyes and a sly, curving smile. The girl wore a suit of black leather, banded with strips of ivory carved to look like spider legs. She cut her gaze to Abeke and Meilin, then to Shane, her lips barely moving as she spoke. "*These* are the moths you've worked so hard to net, brother? I'm disappointed."

Brother! Abeke took in the girl's sharp jaw, her high cheekbones and thick white-blond hair, and saw the resemblance. This girl was one of the Marked too; a spider, as large as a seagull, was perched on her shoulder. Banded in yellow, its swollen abdomen declared that it was venomous.

For a moment Shane seemed taken aback by his sister's words, but when he spoke his voice was mocking. "Drina. Want to tell us again about your many times losing to the Keeper of Greenhaven? Or would you prefer not to talk about it?"

Shane had drawn blood. Now it was Drina's turn to look wounded, though when she noticed Zerif watching her face hardened, turned scoffing. Abeke sensed that this conversation between siblings would have gone differently if Zerif hadn't been there.

"Enough!" Zerif barked, right as Drina opened her mouth to retort. "Victory in Nilo is almost at hand — there is no need to squabble like children."

Abeke risked a glance at Meilin — dissension among the Conquerors might

be something that they could use to their advantage. But Meilin sat still on the deck, palms open on her knees, eyes shut. Taking in nothing.

The four Conquerors — Shane, Zerif, Aidana, and Drina — stared down at Abeke and Meilin. As they did, the sun emerged from behind its clouds, and in the sudden light Abeke couldn't make out their faces. They were just four figures cut out of the sky, looming over the chained girls. She felt wretched to be so helpless before them.

“Not much to look at, are they?” Zerif asked. “But then, I knew from the moment I met Abeke that we had nothing to fear from her. Even her father seemed disappointed in the girl. He must be even more disappointed now, with Okaihee in the middle of conquered territory.”

A familiar feeling of powerless rage swelled in Abeke. It was like back in her village, when her sister, Soama, would hold Abeke's hair from her face and catalog her flaws. What Soama had most wanted was to feel pretty, and the easiest way to accomplish that had been to make Abeke feel ugly. She'd learned to keep her face perfectly still then, and she tried to do that again now. All the same, she yearned to release Uraza and see the leopard lock her fangs around Zerif's throat. But the Conqueror had his jackal spirit animal threading between his ankles. The beast had alert eyes, and it revealed sharp teeth as it panted. Drina's spider was up high on her shoulder, crouching on its legs, as if to pounce. It would be foolish to attack.

“On your feet,” Zerif ordered.

Abeke hesitated, but Meilin dragged herself up, chains clanking. Abeke looked at her friend's face and found it blank. For a moment, she worried that Meilin wasn't Meilin, that she'd been possessed by Gerathon. But then Abeke saw that Meilin's fists were clenched.

“Now,” Zerif said, smiling cruelly. He crossed his arms. “Get back onto your knees.”

Abeke glanced at Shane, who seemed at a loss in the face of the man's sadism. Meilin quivered with barely repressed rage. *Don't attack*, Abeke

mentally pleaded. *Now isn't the time.*

“He said *on your knees!*” Drina kicked her foot out. She was quick, much more so than Abeke would have anticipated. It was like the girl had the very same reflexes as her spider. Before she knew what was happening, Abeke and Meilin were on their knees. Abeke’s chin hit the deck hard, and she tasted blood in her mouth.

“Drina!” she heard Shane say. “Stop it.”

Abeke kept her eyes closed in the long moment that followed. She was surprised to hear how repentant Drina’s voice sounded when she spoke again. “I’m sorry, brother.”

Zerif chortled. “Gar wants them brought ashore, but dear me if he didn’t say *how*. When we last met, Abeke tried to fire an arrow through my heart. It’s my right to exact payment. I say they swim.”

Shane started to protest, but the words were lost. Abeke felt a heavy boot at her back, and then she was rolling forward across the deck. For a moment she was stopped by the chain that linked her to Meilin. Then she heard a whump and a cry as Zerif kicked Meilin too. Abeke heard her friend skid across the deck, and then she was falling.

Overboard.

Abeke clawed at the deck’s planks, desperately trying to get a handhold, but all she got were fistfuls of splinters. She could hear Meilin’s cries from over the side of the ship, her weight dragging Abeke over. Shane’s shocked face was the last thing she saw as she whipped over the deck and through open air. She heard Meilin splash, and then impacted the water a moment later.

Abeke’s stomach plummeted, and the shock of cold salt water ripped at her mouth. The heavy chain was dragging them into the depths. Abeke swam against it on impulse, stroking toward the surface. It was nearly impossible to make any headway; only by pulling at the water with all her might could she stop from sinking farther. Meilin foundered somewhere below, dragging Abeke down.

Finally the pull on the chain lessened, and Abeke was able to break into open

air. She slapped frantically at the water to prevent being pulled back under. Through stinging eyes she saw that Meilin was beside her, fighting just as hard to stay above the surface. Abeke's muscles were already on fire. They would only be able to keep this up for moments before they'd succumb and sink.

Meilin was gasping, and the chain got heavier and heavier. Abeke couldn't spare the energy to look up, but she distantly heard Shane's voice calling for help. Drina was shouting at Zerif, and even she sounded panicked.

Shane yelled down. "Abeke, swim to shore! Swim to shore! It's not far."

Desperate, Abeke searched for the shoreline. Shane was wrong. Between the drag of the chain and the searing of her salt-scoured lungs, the shore looked impossibly far away. But it was their only hope.

"Meilin!" she cried. "This might be our chance! Come on!"

Amid Drina's screeching and Shane's bellowing, Abeke began to swim. It felt like someone had set fires in her exhausted legs. Meilin was beside her, at least, matching Abeke's crawling pace through the water. The Zhongese girl, too, was screaming with the exertion. "Come on, Meilin!" Abeke urged as she swam.

"We can do this!"

Despite her determination, Abeke's arms began to slow. Her legs submitted to the merciless chain, sinking lower and lower in the water, and salt water dribbled into her mouth with every gasping breath. She felt Meilin's hands under her arms, trying to help keep her afloat, but it was too late. Abeke was foundering, the water closing tight over her head.

And then her feet touched ground.

A sandbar!

Meilin got to her feet beside Abeke and laughed with relief. Seawater might have been up to their throats, but they weren't drowning anymore. For a long minute both girls panted and recovered.

Meilin glanced back at the ship. "Zerif is insane," she said. "The Conquerors clearly want us alive, or they would have killed us back in Oceanus. So why would he risk drowning us?"

“I nearly killed him,” Abeke said, distracted. “I guess that can make someone testy. But for now we have other things to worry about. Meilin, look!”

At the shore, the sea itself was walking. In front of them, the surf split into two as a huge shape planed through the water. At first Abeke imagined that an undersea boulder was rolling with the tide. But then she saw, beneath the wave, a thrashing tail covered with leather plates. A giant crocodile came to a stop in the surf not a dozen yards away. It stared at the two exhausted girls.

A tall armored figure waded in from the shoreline, a horned mask covering his face. He approached the crocodile and laid a hand on its snout. The man crossed his heavily muscled arms and stared at Abeke and Meilin, trapped on the sandbar.

General Gar, the leader of the Conquerors, was waiting for them. The Devourer.

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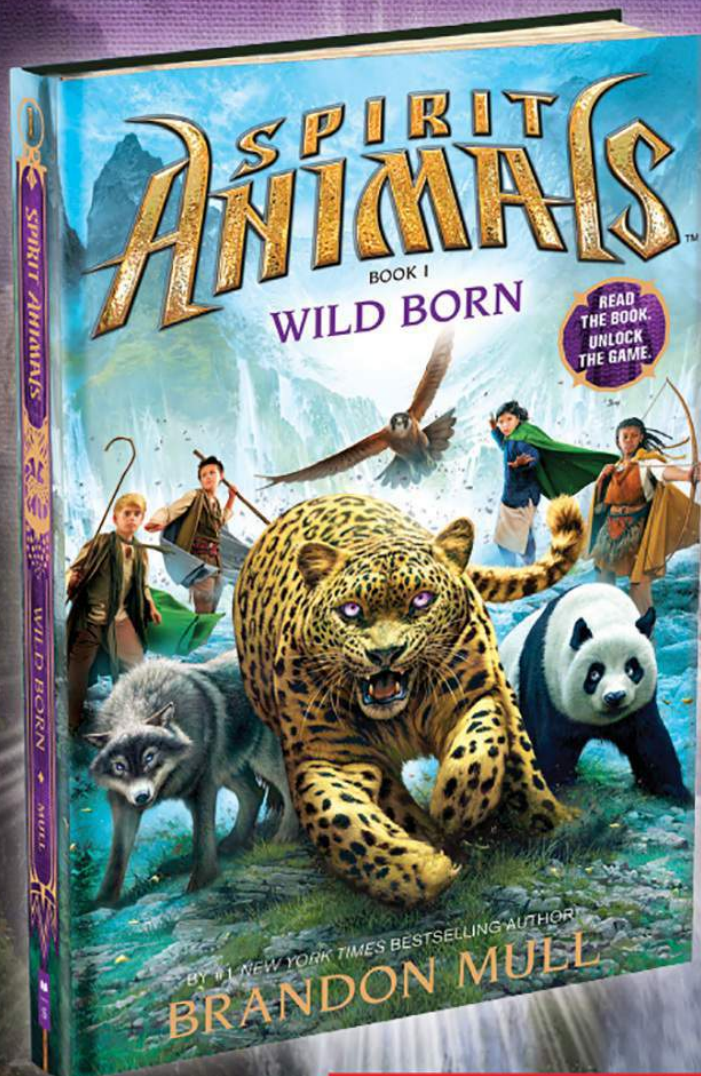
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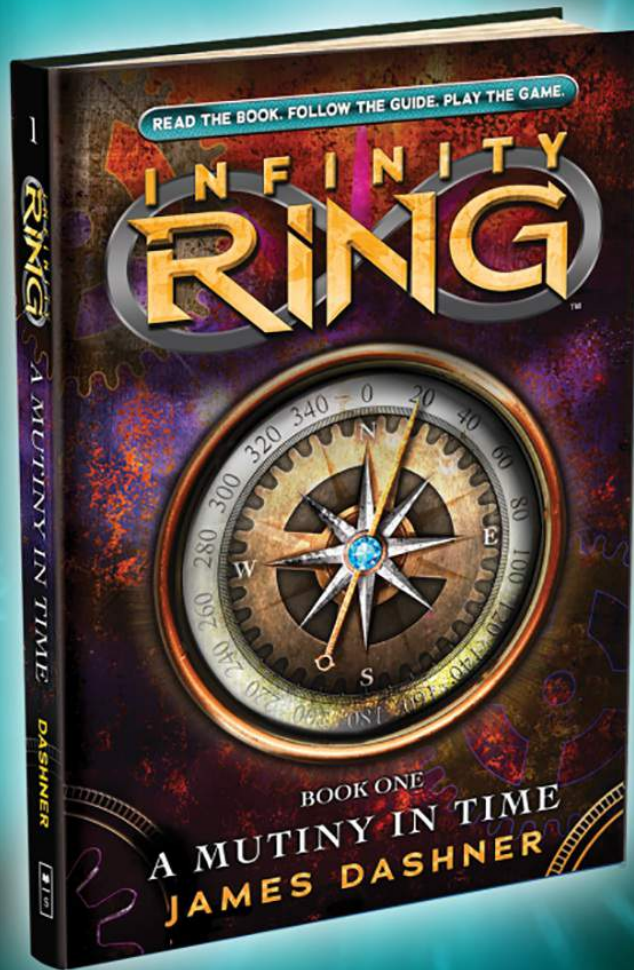
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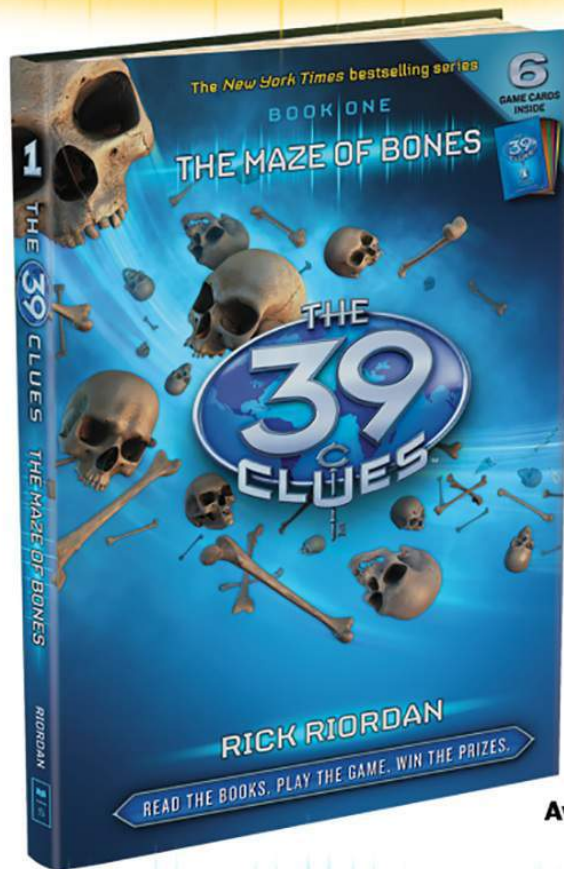
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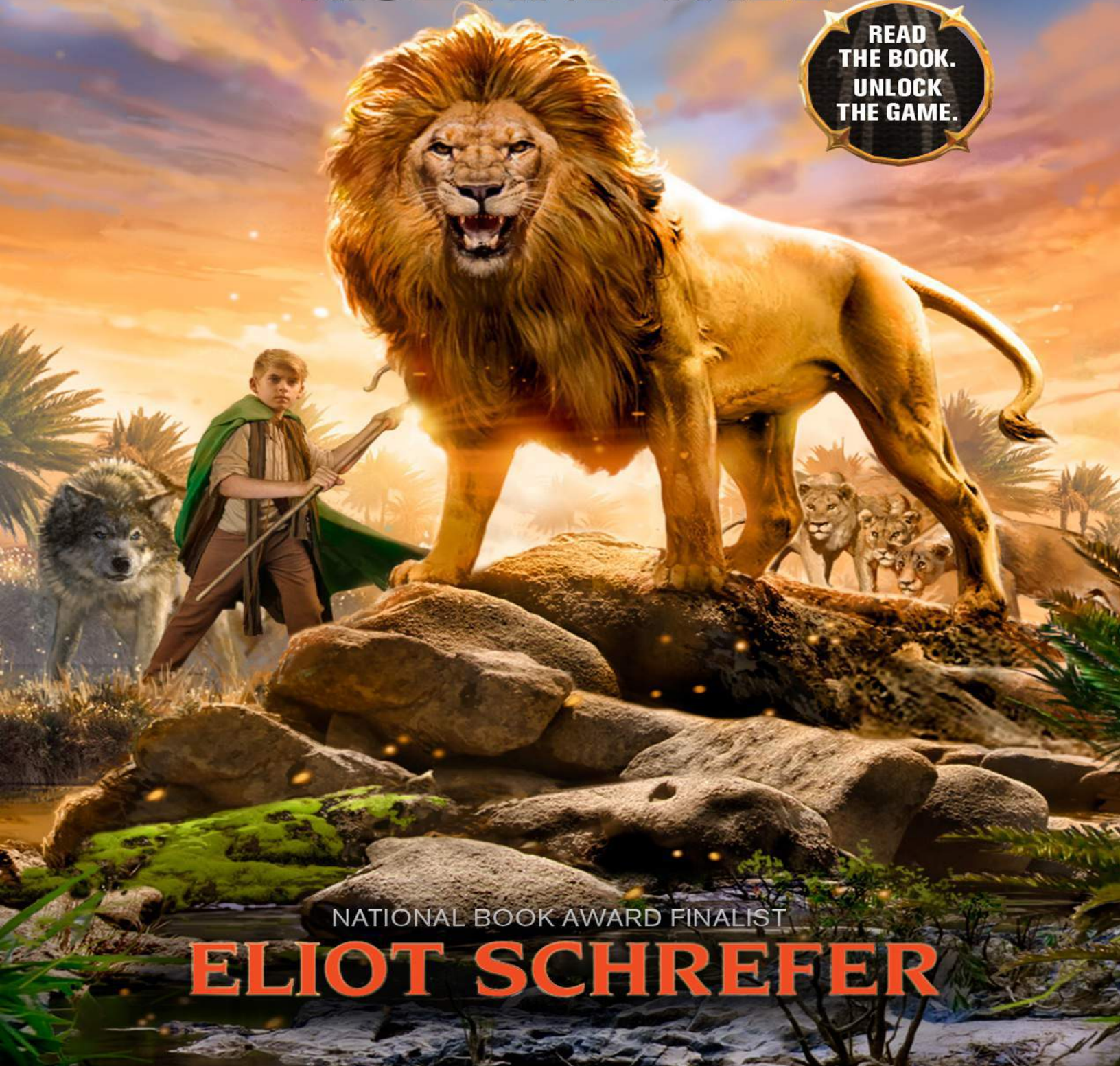
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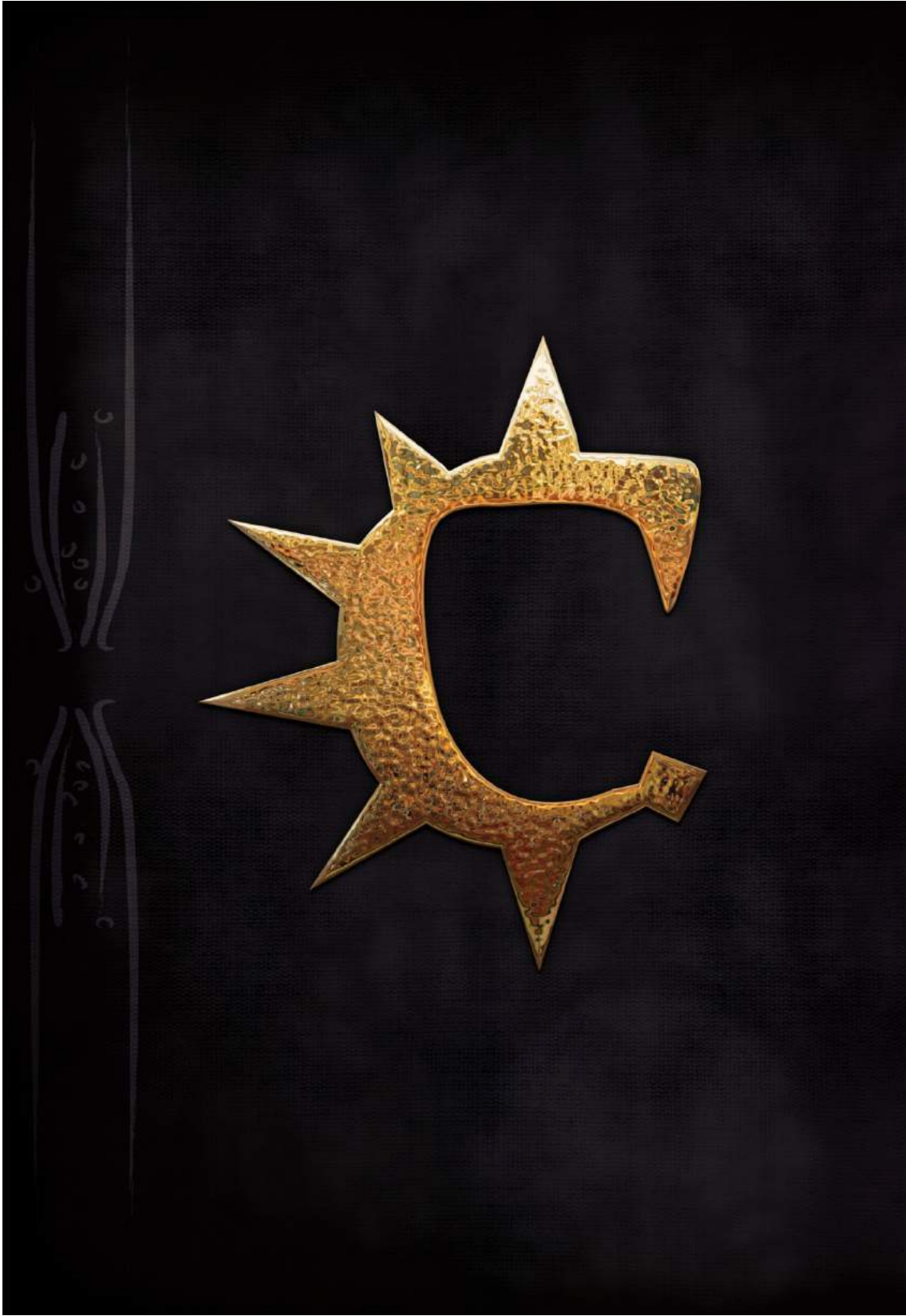
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The surface of the lagoon
began to tremble and shake.

Moving sinuously, the Great
Lion emerged at the far side.



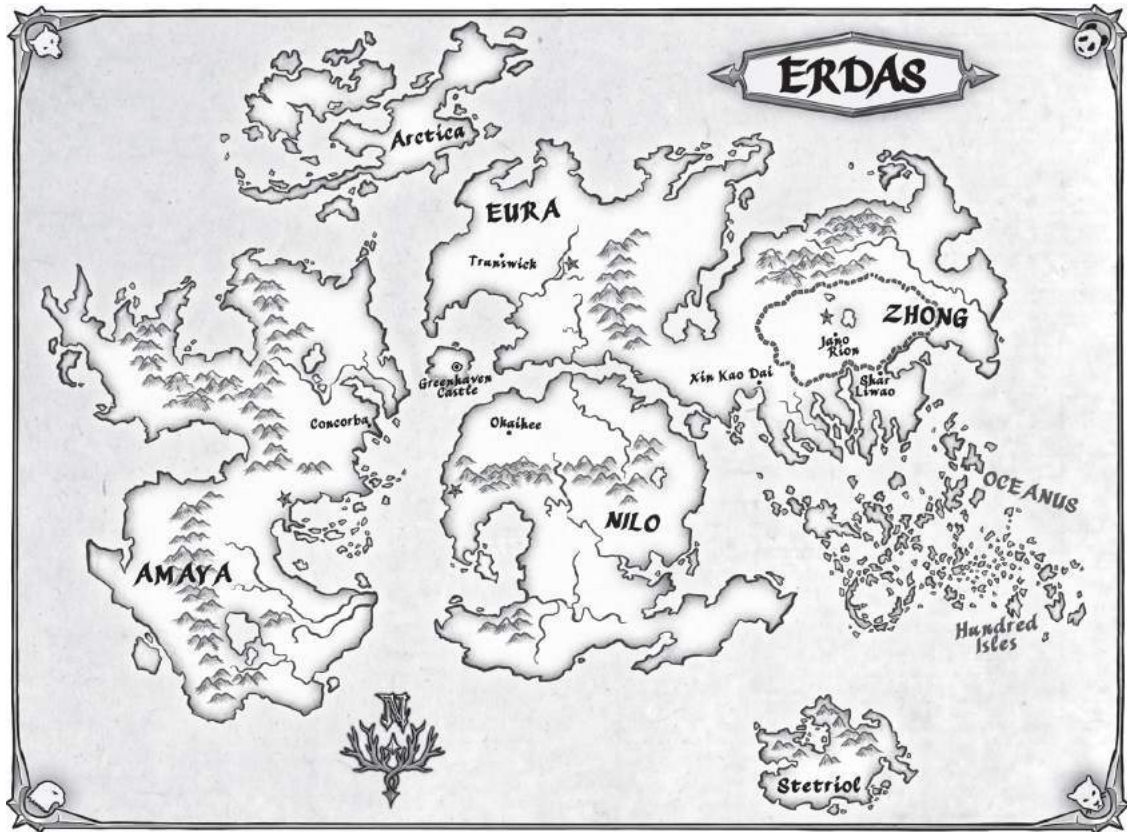
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– E.S.



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1

PRISONERS

T_{HUD!}

Abeke startled awake, shivering. At first she thought she'd dreamed the noise. Then she heard it again.

T_{HUD!}

Abeke leaped, nearly knocking her skull against the ceiling. The chain fastened to her ankle slammed against Meilin, waking her.

"What is it?" Meilin asked, groping in the dark.

Abeke groggily remembered where they were: still imprisoned in the brig of a ship, on their way to the Conqueror camp in southern Nilo. Abeke had once before found herself on a Conqueror ship just like this one — only on that journey she'd been a guest of honor. She'd had a feather bed, a mirror framed in gold, and had been allowed to roam wherever she liked. She hadn't been locked in the brig, a tiny, lightless, reinforced closet deep in the depths of the ship, where the shrieking of the ship's timbers joined the skittering of the rats.

To make their imprisonment complete, Abeke and Meilin were chained together at the ankles with heavy links of iron.

"Voices," Abeke whispered urgently. "Someone's coming. Get up!"

Meilin eased gracefully to her feet, managing to stay noiseless even with the heavy chain linking her ankle to Abeke's. She might be shackled and broken, but

she still had the reflexes of a warrior.

The candlelight that leaked in would have been dim in any other circumstance, but after days in near darkness, Abeke was dazzled. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw a boy in the doorway. He was tall and well built, with pale skin and soft, apologetic eyes. Shane.

Though she held no love for any of the Conquerors, Abeke knew Shane was the closest they had to an ally. Throughout their long boat journey, he'd been the only one to bring them food to eat and fresh water to drink. They'd have died without him.

Abeke could sense the fury coming off Meilin in waves, but her friend held silent. This was Abeke's relationship to navigate.

"Are you two okay?" Shane asked. His tone was gentle, but Abeke was well aware of the saber glinting at the boy's waist, of the power Shane had over them. He was still one of their captors. And Shane was capable of summoning his own ferocious spirit animal, a wolverine. Abeke was confident her leopard, Uraza, could best the creature in normal circumstances, but wolverines were perfectly suited to fighting in close quarters, and Uraza was not.

"We're as good as can be expected," Abeke said curtly, conspicuously rattling their chain.

"I'm truly sorry about that," Shane said, sighing. "I told them there was no need for shackles." He broke off, staring at the ceiling. Scraping sounds came from above. "Your time in the hold is over, anyway. We've arrived at our stronghold."

Abeke narrowed her eyes. Was he expecting her to be relieved? She had no fondness for the brig, but knew that whatever awaited in the Conqueror base was worse. Were they planning to sacrifice Abeke and Meilin to Gerathon, the Great Serpent? Or force Abeke to drink the awful Bile, so she'd be a puppet the Great Beast could control at will, like Meilin?

Abeke struggled to keep her composure, but when she thought of that day at Mulop's grotto, frightening images passed through her mind: Meilin's fingers tight on her arm, digging to the bone as she cruelly hauled her down to the rocky beach. Fighting to get free, only to see Meilin's quarterstaff come smashing down hard against her skull. The world fading from view....

“Our stronghold?” Abeke said, swallowing back the memory. “Whose was it before the Conquerors took it over?”

“It’s a palace of one of the lords of the Niloan steppes,” Shane said with another sigh. “Listen, I’m not proud that we’ve taken over someone’s home. The lord is still alive, and I’m doing my best to make sure the Niloans who work and live here are kept safe and have enough to eat. I’m trying to make the best of this situation.”

Abeke crossed her arms and frowned at him.

“Please come easily with me now, Abeke,” Shane said, eyes downcast. “For your sake, and Meilin’s.”

Abeke glanced at Meilin, who nodded imperceptibly. If Shane was the closest they had to an ally, best to keep him on their side while they got as much information as they could.

“Yes,” Abeke said. “We’ll submit, Shane. Lead the way.”

The ship’s ladder was difficult to navigate with chained ankles. Abeke went up a rung, waited until Meilin was right behind her, then took another step. Finally they broke outside. It was overcast, at least, but still the light was blinding. The moment she hit daylight Abeke had to scrunch her eyes shut, tears streaming down her face.

Shane was there waiting, and with strong hands pulled Abeke and Meilin from the last rung so they were sitting on the deck.

Only slowly did Abeke’s eyes adjust. The moment they did, she gasped.

On deck was a score of Conquerors, loading up a skiff to head to shore. The soldiers wore a uniform of simple leather armor, with breastplates rubbed black with oil. This armor wasn’t ceremonial. It was made for unencumbered fighting.

It’s for fighting Niloans, Abeke thought bitterly. Fighting people who are defending their homes.

Zerif was there, not a foot away, the man who had once tricked Abeke into thinking she was joining the side of good. He still had the same handsome, severely lined face and tight-cropped beard. Beside him was a slender woman Abeke hadn’t seen since her time in the North: Aidana, Rollan’s mother. Though she was unchained, she looked a bit like a prisoner herself, with a gaunt face and exhausted eyes. For the first time, Abeke was relieved that Rollan wasn’t near;

seeing his mother in such a wretched state might have destroyed him.

That wasn't all, though. Next to Aidana was a girl Abeke didn't recognize. She was tall and pale, with large eyes and a sly, curving smile. The girl wore a suit of black leather, banded with strips of ivory carved to look like spider legs. She cut her gaze to Abeke and Meilin, then to Shane, her lips barely moving as she spoke. "*These* are the moths you've worked so hard to net, brother? I'm disappointed."

Brother! Abeke took in the girl's sharp jaw, her high cheekbones and thick white-blond hair, and saw the resemblance. This girl was one of the Marked too; a spider, as large as a seagull, was perched on her shoulder. Banded in yellow, its swollen abdomen declared that it was venomous.

For a moment Shane seemed taken aback by his sister's words, but when he spoke his voice was mocking. "Drina. Want to tell us again about your many times losing to the Keeper of Greenhaven? Or would you prefer not to talk about it?"

Shane had drawn blood. Now it was Drina's turn to look wounded, though when she noticed Zerif watching her face hardened, turned scoffing. Abeke sensed that this conversation between siblings would have gone differently if Zerif hadn't been there.

"Enough!" Zerif barked, right as Drina opened her mouth to retort. "Victory in Nilo is almost at hand — there is no need to squabble like children."

Abeke risked a glance at Meilin — dissension among the Conquerors might be something that they could use to their advantage. But Meilin sat still on the deck, palms open on her knees, eyes shut. Taking in nothing.

The four Conquerors — Shane, Zerif, Aidana, and Drina — stared down at Abeke and Meilin. As they did, the sun emerged from behind its clouds, and in the sudden light Abeke couldn't make out their faces. They were just four figures cut out of the sky, looming over the chained girls. She felt wretched to be so helpless before them.

"Not much to look at, are they?" Zerif asked. "But then, I knew from the moment I met Abeke that we had nothing to fear from her. Even her father seemed disappointed in the girl. He must be even more disappointed now, with Okaihee in the middle of conquered territory."

A familiar feeling of powerless rage swelled in Abeke. It was like back in her village, when her sister, Soama, would hold Abeke's hair from her face and catalog her flaws. What Soama had most wanted was to feel pretty, and the easiest way to accomplish that had been to make Abeke feel ugly. She'd learned to keep her face perfectly still then, and she tried to do that again now. All the same, she yearned to release Uraza and see the leopard lock her fangs around Zerif's throat. But the Conqueror had his jackal spirit animal threading between his ankles. The beast had alert eyes, and it revealed sharp teeth as it panted. Drina's spider was up high on her shoulder, crouching, as if to pounce. It would be foolish to attack.

"On your feet," Zerif ordered.

Abeke hesitated, but Meilin dragged herself up, chains clanking. Abeke looked at her friend's face and found it blank. For a moment, she worried that Meilin wasn't Meilin, that she'd been possessed by Gerathon. But then Abeke saw that Meilin's fists were clenched.

"Now," Zerif said, smiling cruelly. He crossed his arms. "Get back onto your knees."

Abeke glanced at Shane, who seemed at a loss in the face of the man's sadism. Meilin quivered with barely repressed rage. *Don't attack*, Abeke mentally pleaded. *Now isn't the time*.

"He said *on your knees!*" Drina kicked her foot out. She was quick, much more so than Abeke would have anticipated. It was like the girl had the very same reflexes as her spider. Before she knew what was happening, Abeke and Meilin were on their knees. Abeke's chin hit the deck hard, and she tasted blood in her mouth.

"Drina!" she heard Shane say. "Stop it."

Abeke kept her eyes closed in the long moment that followed. She was surprised to hear how repentant Drina's voice sounded when she spoke again. "I'm sorry, brother."

Zerif chortled. "Gar wants them brought ashore, but dear me if he didn't say *how*. When we last met, Abeke tried to fire an arrow through my heart. It's my right to exact payment. I say they swim."

Shane started to protest, but the words were lost. Abeke felt a heavy boot at

her back, and then she was rolling forward across the deck. For a moment she was stopped by the chain that linked her to Meilin. Then she heard a whump and a cry as Zerif kicked Meilin too. Abeke heard her friend skid across the deck, and then she was falling.

Overboard.

Abeke clawed at the deck's planks, desperately trying to get a handhold, but all she got were fistfuls of splinters. She could hear Meilin's cries from over the side of the ship, her weight dragging Abeke over. Shane's shocked face was the last thing she saw as she whipped over the deck and through open air. She heard Meilin splash, and then impacted the water a moment later.

Abeke's stomach plummeted, and the shock of cold salt water ripped at her mouth. The heavy chain was dragging them into the depths. Abeke swam against it on impulse, stroking toward the surface. It was nearly impossible to make any headway; only by pulling at the water with all her might could she stop from sinking farther. Meilin foundered somewhere below, dragging Abeke down.

Finally the pull on the chain lessened, and Abeke was able to break into open air. She slapped frantically at the water to prevent being pulled back under. Through stinging eyes she saw that Meilin was beside her, fighting just as hard to stay above the surface. Abeke's muscles were already on fire. They would only be able to keep this up for moments before they'd succumb and sink.

Meilin was gasping, and the chain got heavier and heavier. Abeke couldn't spare the energy to look up, but she distantly heard Shane's voice calling for help. Drina was shouting at Zerif, and even she sounded panicked.

Shane yelled down. "Abeke, swim to shore! Swim to shore! It's not far."

Desperate, Abeke searched for the shoreline. Shane was wrong. Between the drag of the chain and the searing of her salt-scoured lungs, the shore looked impossibly far away. But it was their only hope.

"Meilin!" she cried. "This might be our chance! Come on!"

Amid Drina's screeching and Shane's bellowing, Abeke began to swim. It felt like someone had set fires in her exhausted legs. Meilin was beside her, at least, matching Abeke's crawling pace through the water. The Zhongese girl, too, was screaming with the exertion. "Come on, Meilin!" Abeke urged as she swam. "We can do this!"

Despite her determination, Abeke's arms began to slow. Her legs submitted to the merciless chain, sinking lower and lower in the water, and salt water dribbled into her mouth with every gasping breath. She felt Meilin's hands under her arms, trying to help keep her afloat, but it was too late. Abeke was foundering, the water closing tight over her head.

And then her feet touched ground.

A sandbar!

Meilin got to her feet beside Abeke and laughed with relief. Seawater might have been up to their throats, but they weren't drowning anymore. For a long minute both girls panted and recovered.

Meilin glanced back at the ship. "Zerif is insane," she said. "The Conquerors clearly want us alive, or they would have killed us back in Oceanus. So why would he risk drowning us?"

"I nearly killed him," Abeke said, distracted. "I guess that can make someone testy. But for now we have other things to worry about. Meilin, look!"

At the shore, the sea itself was walking. In front of them, the surf split into two as a huge shape planed through the water. At first Abeke imagined that an undersea boulder was rolling with the tide. But then she saw, beneath the wave, a thrashing tail covered with leather plates. A giant crocodile came to a stop in the surf not a dozen yards away. It stared at the two exhausted girls.

A tall armored figure waded in from the shoreline, a horned mask covering his face. He approached the crocodile and laid a hand on its snout. The man crossed his heavily muscled arms and stared at Abeke and Meilin, trapped on the sandbar.

General Gar, the leader of the Conquerors, was waiting for them. The Devourer.

OKAIHEE

ROLLAN KNEW MAKING THEIR WAY ACROSS NILO TO FIND the Golden Lion of Cabaro would mean struggling to survive in hostile territory, but he'd consoled himself that at least it would be hot, like the Concorba of his early years. During the day they all sweated plenty — Rollan's tunic was still ringed in salt stains. But now that the sun had gone down, he was shivering. Rollan was glad for the spot where his shoulder touched Conor's. It felt like the only part of his body that was warm.

The evening was pretty, Rollan would give it that. The stars were thick in the sky, occasionally blotted by the silhouettes of slender trees swaying in the breeze. Tarik had stopped them on a sandy bluff overlooking a small village, where they were just barely camouflaged by a scrawny, scaly bush. *Okaihee might be occupied by Conquerors*, Tarik had warned. *We should watch for a while to see who goes in and out.*

So far, that meant precisely no one. As the evening wrapped them in its chill, the ruddy cooking fires on the other side of the palisade were starting to look very attractive to Rollan. Even if those fires turned out to be surrounded by the enemy, at least they would be warm.

Chances were that *Okaihee* was occupied — in all the villages they'd come to so far, the chiefs had either been killed or had pledged support to the

Conquerors in return for protection. Tarik had explained that what “protection” really meant was their children wouldn’t be pressed into service, and only half their crops would be seized to feed the invading armies.

Though Okaihee looked calm, they’d learned the hard way to move cautiously into villages. The day before they’d approached a village chief, only to be surrounded by a half dozen Conquerors before they knew it, one of whom fought alongside a particularly vicious lynx. Rollan ran his fingers over the bandaged wound on his forearm. Meilin would have pretended to be repulsed by the scar, but Rollan thought she’d be secretly impressed.

Meilin. Where was she?

If only he knew. Their campaign in Oceanus had ended in such a whirlwind. They’d finally met Mulop the Octopus, who gave up his Coral Octopus willingly, cautioning them why the Devourer was so intent on collecting the talismans guarded by the Great Beasts — he was going to free Kovo the Ape from his prison.

But that’s when things went really bad. Rollan was haunted by the strange, sick look in Meilin’s eyes when she’d turned on them. Even worse was that he’d recognized it from his mother, Aidana, when *she* had been controlled by Gerathon. Twice now he had nearly been killed by people he cared about and forced to stare down the Great Serpent through their eyes.

Rollan shook his head, trying to get his thoughts back on the Okaihee palisade. But the vision of possessed Meilin, her face impassive as she dragged Abeke toward the Conquerors, kept returning to his mind. It was like the universe was trying to prove something to him: *You will be left time and again. Loving you is a curse.*

Whenever Rollan saw Essix’s outline pass before the scant moonlit clouds in the night sky, his suffering slackened. At least the falcon had been faithful — and was starting to act as if she almost liked him. If it hadn’t been for her, he might not have been able to go forward with their mission. Tarik too: The elder Greencloak had been rock-steady as he led them deeper and deeper into the occupied lands of Nilo, though Rollan knew that the loss of Meilin and Abeke had affected him. Maybe more than he could afford to show.

“Hey, Rollan,” Conor said. Rollan startled at the voice. His best friend, with

his calm and trusting eyes, looked concerned by what he found in Rollan's expression. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Rollan said. He shifted on the ground. "Well, you know, I'm freezing. And there's sand in my underpants. And a thorn is literally in my side. But otherwise, I'm doing great."

"You just ..." Conor said, his voice trailing off. He coughed. "I was thinking, just for myself, that it's important that we talk about what happened as much as we can."

"You can't be serious," Rollan said. "We're in occupied territory, trying to track down one of the last free talismans, and you're worried about our *feelings*?"

Tarik, on his belly on the far side of Conor, reached across the boy to lay a hand on Rollan's shoulder. He whispered, "What you mean to say is that you agree with Conor. That we should keep reminding ourselves that it wasn't Meilin's fault. It wasn't, and it isn't. And we'll find her and Abeke. But it's okay to feel upset about it. It breaks me apart that they were taken. But all the same, we can't pretend they weren't."

"For the love of Mulop!" Rollan said. "*Both* of you?! I can't believe what I'm hearing. Tarik, I expected better."

Tarik clamped his strong hand over Rollan's mouth.

"Hmph," Rollan said, straining to lift the man's fingers. "Mmph!"

"Shh," whispered the senior Greencloak, returning to his survey of the village.

"Yeah!" Conor joined. "*Shh*, Rollan."

Tarik clamped his other hand over Conor's mouth. "There's something moving out there. On the far right side of the palisade. I can't quite tell. Rollan, could you —"

"On it," Rollan said. Or "hmphit," since Tarik's hand was still over his mouth. As Tarik lifted it, Rollan let his consciousness drift to Essix, who was circling the palisade, high in the air currents above.

This was a trick Rollan had picked up while they were battling through Nilo. One day his mind had been wandering, and he peered up at the falcon and thought to himself: *What would it be like to see the savannah from up there?*

Then, ominously, his vision blacked out. After a sick moment of panic, he'd seen a pinprick of light appear at the center of the blackness, and suddenly Rollan could see again.

That's when he really panicked.

Because what Rollan had seen was the world from a thousand feet up. He was looking *through* Essix's eyes. Somehow she'd snatched up his daydreaming mind like a delicious desert mouse and carried it soaring over the savannah. It took a few more tries before he finally stopped screaming and learned to enjoy it.

The falcon's eyes were on either side of her head, and the first sensation Rollan had now was of how wide open the world was. He could see above, below, and on both sides, simultaneously taking in the yellow moon, the forests to the north, the swamps to the west, and the motion of a flying squirrel as it leaped between tree branches. The falcon's vision never stayed in one place for more than a moment, ever flitting among the grasses and buildings below. Essix was obviously used to the way her eyes worked, but it made Rollan feel like he was tumbling down a hill with his eyes open. His stomach clenched at the constant motion. Still, something caught his attention. Something big.

"There's an elephant," he reported. His vision was still with Essix, but he'd learned he could speak through his own mouth if he concentrated. "Pressing against the palisade wall."

"An elephant? Like Dinesh?" Conor asked, Briggan rumbling worriedly in the background.

"Much smaller than Dinesh — this is a normal elephant. But yes."

Essix cried in the night and flew tighter circles over the elephant at the palisade. "It's ... breaking down the wall, like it's trying to bash its way through," Rollan reported. "Something has it spooked."

Conor grunted. "Are there any Conquerors with it?"

"No," Rollan said, returning to his own vision to see Conor searching the shadows. "It's alone."

Conor opened his mouth, but then stilled when they heard a tremendous crash.

"Hold on," Rollan said. "Let me get back into Essix's vision."

“No need,” Tarik said, squinting into the darkness. He crouched on his feet, curved sword at the ready, his powerful body tensed. “It’s quite clear what happened. That elephant knocked down the palisade wall. It is probably a Bile-fed puppet of the Conquerors. Okaihee has been breached.”

“Come on,” Conor said to Briggan. The wolf had been dozing only a minute ago, head heavy on his paws. But now he was on his feet, growling softly. “It’s time to go help Okaihee.”

“Don’t you think,” Rollan said, “that maybe we should *avoid* the insane elephant?”

Conor, Tarik, and even Briggan stared back at him balefully. “Okay,” Rollan said, getting to his feet. “Fine, let’s go. I was starting to get termites up my pant legs anyway.”

As they stole down the hillside toward the noise, shouts rose from the village as the elephant progressed through Okaihee.

When they reached the palisade, they saw that the wall had been trampled. Logs and rope were jumbled along either side. They heard another large crash from the far side of Okaihee, and Briggan crouched, growling.

“It seems our elephant found its own way out,” Rollan said.

“Well,” Tarik said. “If Abeke’s village *has* been occupied by the Conquerors, this would be a good distraction to use to our advantage. We should find Chinwe as soon as possible. She’s a faithful Greencloak, and was present at Abeke’s Nectar Ceremony. She can help fill us in on what’s happening here, and might be able to point us toward the Golden Lion of Cabaro.”

They started forward, but Tarik raised a hand to stop them. “Above all, be alert to Conquerors. I don’t want to lose you two, as well.”

Rollan sensed Essix gliding over them as they crept into the village. Briggan loomed large in the moonlight, but Rollan wasn’t too worried the wolf would get them spotted — there weren’t signs of Conquerors. In fact, the whole village was eerily quiet. Whoever was shouting earlier must have either chased after the elephant or returned home. All was silent and dark, grass curtains fluttering in the night breezes.

As they crept forward, Rollan in the lead, he couldn’t shake the suspicion that they were being watched. He peered into the homes they passed, but could

see no one. He approached the fire pit, where the elephant must have finally managed to disentangle itself from the fence debris. Bits of wood and cord were everywhere. Rollan picked at a loose plank with his foot, half-expecting something to lunge out at him. “Conor,” he finally said, “do you sense any —”

Suddenly Rollan was on his back, a sharpened stick jabbing into his throat. He batted it away on reflex, but then the point was back, pressing right into his windpipe. “Help!” Rollan managed to cry, the sound strangled by the thrusting weapon. Then he saw who was assaulting him.

It was a skinny girl, a bit younger than himself.

Rollan could see Tarik and Conor creeping behind the girl, both crouched low to the ground, ready to pounce if she made a wrong move. Beside Conor, Briggan growled, a noise that sent the hairs on Rollan’s arms on end — and that was knowing the wolf was on *his* side.

But the girl didn’t seem afraid. As she stared into his eyes, Rollan saw a dullness to her gaze, a sense of what-more-could-life-do-to-me? He recognized it from the street orphans he’d known in Concorba. This girl had been through trauma.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Tarik said from behind her. “You don’t need to threaten him.”

The girl stared down at Rollan flatly, ignoring Tarik.

Rollan wanted to speak, but the stick was still jammed firmly into his neck. All he could do was continue to stare up at his attacker, his eyes wide.

“We’re friends of Abeke,” Tarik continued. “She used to live in this village. Do you know her?”

The girl’s eyes lit slightly. She turned her head, and the pressure on the stick at Rollan’s throat lessened.

“Can you tell us where Chinwe is? We’d like to speak to her.”

The girl’s eyes cast back down.

“What’s your name?” Rollan croaked, rubbing his throat.

“Irtike,” the girl mumbled.

“Irtike,” Rollan said. “Can you tell us where Chinwe is?”

“She’s dead,” the girl whispered simply. Finally she stepped away from Rollan and stood at ease, though still gripping her sharpened stick. “She was

killed by the Conquerors while protecting Okaihee during the first invasion. We gave her a funeral at the end of the last rainy season.”

Tarik bowed his head. “You have my sympathies. She was a strong, kind woman. The village must be mourning her loss very much.”

“Is Okaihee under Conqueror control now?” Rollan asked, crawling to his feet.

“No,” the girl whispered. “Abeke’s father, Pojalo, became the new chieftain when our old one was killed defending the village, with Chinwe. He has worked hard ever since to keep us beneath the Conquerors’ notice. They leave us alone because there is little of value left here. Our crops have all failed.”

“Where is Pojalo?” Tarik asked.

Irtike pointed to a hut indistinguishable from the rest, at the other side of the fire pit.

“Thank you,” Rollan said. He felt her stare hot on his back as he turned to confer with his companions.

Tarik shook his head grimly. “Chinwe was a capable and courageous fighter, with a powerful wildebeest at her side. If anyone could have led us safely to Cabaro, it was her. If even she has fallen ...”

“We’ll find a way,” Conor said. “You’re the best fighter the Greencloaks have.”

“I’m glad for your confidence,” Tarik said, a weak smile on his face. “But I’d hoped to find allies here. With Meilin and Abeke gone, and Chinwe dead ... We’ve lost so many great warriors. So many friends.”

After a moment, Tarik seemed to find some inner reservoir of courage. He lifted his head resolutely and led them toward Pojalo’s hut. Rollan heard a rush of wind and felt Essix’s familiar talons on his shoulder. He stroked the bird’s clawed leg. She surprised him by giving an affectionate nip in response.

“It’s the custom in this region that a visitor be introduced to the chief by another member of the village,” Tarik said. “It’s a wise practice, since it gets the community invested in one another’s affairs and prevents outsiders from manipulating any one villager. But I don’t know how we’ll get an introduction to the chief, with Chinwe gone.”

Something sharp jabbed Rollan in the back and he jumped. “Aiee! Hey!”

When Rollan whirled, he saw a small figure with now-familiar solemn eyes blinking up at him.

“I’ll introduce you,” Irtike declared. She swept her braids back from her thin face and smoothed her simple wrap over her narrow hips.

Conor chuckled. “Looks like you’ve made a new friend.”

Rollan glared at Conor. He opened his mouth to speak, had so many things he wanted to say about girls who snuck up on people and jabbed them with spears.

“Thank you, Irtike,” Tarik said, intervening. “We are honored.”

Irtike nodded, then loped gracefully to the chief’s doorway. She called something in the local language, then listened for a response. After a male voice shouted back, Irtike pulled aside the heavy grass curtain and ushered them inside.

The hut, so unassuming from the outside, was actually very spacious. A cooking pit was at the center, an iron pot steaming away over hot embers, giving off a wonderful aroma of greens and cream and nuts. Banded chests were stacked at one side, and at the other was a long table set for a simple meal. At the far end of the hut was a man Rollan assumed was the new chieftain, Abeke’s father, Pojalo. He wore a length of beaded red fabric wrapped around his head. Beside him was a girl who was unmistakably Abeke’s sister.

Abeke had once said Soama was the more beautiful sister, but that’s not how Rollan would have put it. Lips lined with kohl, a beaded headpiece flashing on her forehead, the girl simply looked more ... precious than Abeke. It wasn’t a quality Rollan particularly admired.

Irtike whispered to Pojalo, and he nodded gravely in return, the scowl on his face not lifting. When he gestured to a low wicker stool at his side, Irtike shyly ducked her head and sat on it.

“Greetings,” Tarik said. “We are —”

Soama made a tsk, and Tarik fell silent. They all stared at one another. *Awkward*, thought Rollan, while Irtike stared furiously into the ground. Taking a cue from her, Rollan began scrutinizing the dusty wicker mat below his feet.

Pojalo finally spoke. “You may state your business now.”

“I am Tarik, and these young warriors are Conor and Rollan. We are

Greencloaks, and come with tidings of your daughter. Abeke —”

“And those are the Great Beasts Briggan and Essix,” Pojalo interrupted. “My daughter summoned a Great Beast too. Uraza the Leopard.”

“She certainly did,” Tarik said, a strained smile on his face. “And it ushered in an extraordinary time. Actually,” he continued, “I would like to speak to you about your daughter.”

But Pojalo raised a finger to stop him. “When my daughter summoned Uraza,” he said, “it marked her as special. Our tribe has been without a Rain Dancer for years, and we had hopes that Abeke would serve as our next. But she was taken by the Greencloaks. By you.”

“Excuse me,” Rollan said. Even though he wasn’t a Greencloak, himself — no way was he going to spend his whole life obeying someone else’s orders — Rollan was irked that Pojalo had gotten it so wrong. Abeke had *not* been taken by the Greencloaks. It had been Zerif, masquerading as a Greencloak.

Rollan was about to say so when Pojalo held up a hand to silence him. It only made Rollan want to talk louder, of course, but then he saw Irtike make an almost unnoticeable “back off” gesture with her fingers. Remembering the sharp stick she’d pressed so confidently to his jugular, Rollan obeyed her.

“If we’d had a Rain Dancer, we would have had rain,” Pojalo said. “But you Greencloaks took Abeke from us, and so our drought continues. Our crops have failed. We were famished and weak when the Conquerors attacked, and we soon lost our previous chief, as well as our Greencloak, Chinwe. If you are as concerned as you claim about the Conquerors dominating Nilo, perhaps you should not have taken the one person who might have kept us strong. We are a proud people, but it’s only a matter of time until we will have to submit, like so many others. I will keep Okaihee independent as long as I can. But if you hope to save Nilo, then all I can say is that you have gone about it foolishly so far.”

Why hadn’t Pojalo asked about Abeke yet? Rollan opened his mouth to speak, but Conor beat him to the question. “Perhaps, my lord, you would like to hear of your daughter?” he asked.

Pojalo glared at Conor. “You use polite titles, boy, but in Nilo it is the chieftain who decides who will speak when.”

Rollan had seen Conor scolded by nobility before. Back in Trunswick, the

young lord Devin had once silenced him with a similar tone, and Rollan had watched his meek, gentle friend recoil from the rebuke, his face full of shame. But a lot had changed since Trunswick. Now, Conor's face flushed with anger and his eyes glinted. Even Briggan's hackles were raised.

"*You* have permission to speak," the chieftain said, gesturing to Tarik.

"We bear news of Abeke, when you wish to hear it," Tarik said, speaking carefully. "But right now, you should know that we witnessed an elephant break the village's palisade. Surely you heard the noise."

Soama and her father exchanged a look. "This is not the first time we have experienced such a disturbance," Pojalo said. "But there are few able adults left in Okaihee, and I cannot rally them until morning. We must hope that the Conquerors will not take advantage of the breach before we can repair it."

"I fear," Tarik said, "that the elephant could be here precisely as part of a plan to attack your village. Wherever there are Conquerors, there are also animals who have been force-fed Bile and turned into monsters. Perhaps this elephant is their puppet. It seems likely that it broke the palisade precisely so the enemy force could enter after it."

Pojalo chuckled. "Oh yes, that elephant was indeed being controlled. But not by the Conquerors. You know less of the current situation in Nilo than you think, stranger."

Rollan couldn't resist speaking up. "What do you mean?"

Pojalo sighed in frustration, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to tell you. We have had ... numerous animals entering our village lately. They always arrive from the north and leave toward the south. Any wild creature that was thinking straight would go around, but they are single-minded in their path. We cleared out the huts from the center of the village so they could have an unobstructed course and do less damage. The Conquerors are a bad enough problem, but that elephant was not sent by them. It was not possessed by Bile."

"Who, then, is behind this strange animal behavior?" Tarik asked.

Pojalo hung his head. It was Soama who spoke, her voice both proud and faint, like she'd once had much poise but had been brought low by recent times. "They say he was the first creature to settle in Nilo, that he has been here for

eons, since long before the age of man. He is as old as the savannah itself. A mighty titan, a giant lion who lives in a secluded oasis in the southern desert. He hates all humans.” The girl’s voice dropped low. “Cabaro the Lion.”

“The Great Beast,” Conor mouthed.

“It is Cabaro that we search for!” Tarik said. “We need to secure his talisman before the Conquerors can get it first. We’ve recently learned that they mean to use the talismans to free Kovo the Ape from his prison. If they succeed, then whatever hope we have of resisting the Conquerors will be dashed.”

“Interesting,” Pojalo said, leaning forward as he weighed the words in his mouth. “What do you intend?”

“Our passage through Nilo has been difficult, and we have already lost precious allies. We need your aid to get farther, and someone who can help us negotiate with the tribes that we pass. We need someone who knows this terrain. We were hoping Chinwe could come with us —”

“Chinwe is dead.”

Tarik nodded gravely. “Irtike has told us as much. We are sorry for the loss — yours and ours.”

Pojalo cut Irtike a harsh look. “You spoke to them? You didn’t bring them directly to me?”

“Oh, believe me,” Rollan said. “She didn’t exactly greet us with hugs and kisses.”

Irtike spoke, her voice quiet but her jaw jutting out defiantly. “I intervened only to tell them about my mother.”

Chinwe was Irtike’s mother! No wonder she had that numbed-over look that Rollan recognized from his fellow orphans in Concorba.

“Do you think,” Tarik said, “that you might be able to spare some able bodies? Our goals are aligned, after all; you must want to see the Conquerors defeated as much as we do.”

Rollan looked hopefully to Soama. But the girl had her arms clamped across her chest, her otherwise beautiful face twisted into a scowl.

Pojalo shook his head. “No, our goals are not aligned. Between the droughts and the turmoil in Nilo, I have lost most of the ‘able bodies’ that Okaihee had. It is only because there is nothing of value left here that the Conquerors have lately

directed their energies elsewhere in the region. If they hear I have helped you, they will return and attack. We cannot survive another assault.”

“Please,” Tarik said. “This is about the fate of all Erdas. If the Conquerors get their hands on the Golden Lion of Cabaro, I can assure you that will also mean the end of Okaihee.”

“My daughter once wrote similar words to me, pleading about the fate of Erdas!” Pojalo yelled, suddenly on his feet. “That was when she told me she was not coming back. You have taken too much already. I won’t sacrifice anything else to the Greencloaks.”

Tarik looked as if he’d been struck. In the days since Meilin and Abeke were captured, the Greencloak guardian had stood a little less tall, walked a little less surely — as if he carried a burden that grew heavier with each passing day. Rollan had shrugged it off before. They were all fatigued, after all. But now, for the first time, Tarik appeared to be at a loss.

The thought scared Rollan.

“You don’t even care about what happened to Abeke,” Conor said. His voice was calm and controlled, but his eyes had narrowed. Beside him, Briggan growled. Not much of a game face, that wolf.

For a moment the hut was still, tension thick in the air. Irtike’s eyes flitted from Conor to Pojalo and back again.

Finally the chieftain spoke, straightening to his full regal bearing. “I do not. Abeke is dead to me. And do not disrespect me by speaking out of turn again. I will not stand for it.”

“She is the pride of the Greencloaks!” Conor cried. “She’s saved countless lives. You should be *proud* of your daughter.”

“Stop!” Pojalo barked, tears in his eyes. “I do not wish to hear of this!”

“Ow!” Rollan shouted, louder than either of them. All attention in the hut turned to him. Essix had pierced his shoulder with her talons. He rubbed the wound. “What was *that* for?”

Then he followed Essix’s gaze to the entrance of the hut and staggered to his feet.

A lion had slinked in, head bobbing close to the ground as it sniffed the air. Rollan had seen a pride of lions from afar while they were trekking through the

savannah, but this was the first time he had seen one up close.

This particular specimen was lean, almost scrawny, its rib bones visible under its skin and its mane sticking out in irregular tufts. The lion took all of them in, then returned to searching the ground, sniffing. It took a step toward the fire pit in the center, but recoiled from the heat and stepped toward the far wall.

They were all on their feet now, weapons drawn. Rollan glanced at Conor and Tarik, trying to determine if they planned to attack. The lion was, well, a *lion*. But it wasn't aggressive; it was just trying to pass south through the hut, and in its single-minded state hadn't realized there wasn't a second exit.

The lion seemed to have discovered it was trapped. It raised its head and flattened its ears. Displaying its teeth, it let out an angry yowl.

Rollan swallowed. Those teeth were very long.

"The lion's not attacking. Back off from it!" Tarik shouted.

The Greencloak was pressed against the wall but had his curved sword at the ready. He clearly had the same idea that Rollan did: best to give the lost animal a chance to leave on its own.

But that lion, so near, was apparently too much for Soama to take. The girl sprinted for the doorway.

Immediately Rollan realized her error — the lion was penned in now, with no way to escape. It roared, the sound loud enough to make Soama scream out and Irtike drop to her knees. The cat charged Soama, who had gone limp in fear.

Next thing Rollan knew, Essix's fierce wingbeats were buffeting his head. The falcon was on the lion, talons sinking into the animal's backside. Rollan had thought it looked scrawny for a giant cat, but it was clearly extremely strong. The lion jumped into the air and twisted, its whole spine rotating. The motion of it catapulted Essix off, and the falcon hit the far wall before she could right herself, sliding to the ground. With impossible grace, the cat landed back on its feet and stalked toward Soama.

Now it was Briggan's turn. The large wolf faced off against the lion, forelegs splayed so his head was low, flesh pulled back from his long teeth as he growled. Yowling in desperation, the lion slapped the air with its paw, claws extended.

Within a moment, the animals were on each other, tumbling in flashes of yellow and gray fur, jaws snapping in open air as they tried to reach each other's

throats. Rollan was relieved to see Essix take back to the air while Conor rushed to Briggan's side, brandishing his wooden shepherd's staff. Conor swung it in a wide arc, slamming the lion in the side of its head. The cat fell away from Briggan, rolling in the soil but soon recovering its feet.

It tensed its rear legs, like a crossbow being cocked.

Rollan opened his mouth to warn his friend, but it was too late. The lion launched itself at Conor.

The big cat whooshed through the air. Conor was too stunned to do anything but stumble backward, hands helplessly shielding his face. But Briggan wouldn't let the lion near. He leaped, impacting the cat in midair. When they landed, the wolf's jaw was clamped on the lion's shoulders. It yowled and thrashed, Briggan struggling to keep his feet. Tarik advanced, his curved sword extended, while Rollan took a position at the lion's flank.

Tarik brought his curved sword up. He surprised Rollan by pointing it, not at the lion, but at Soama. "Get out of the entranceway," he bellowed. "Now!"

When Tarik yelled at her, Soama seemed to realize herself. She skirted the hut, keeping her eyes fixed on the lion until she'd reached her father and Irtike. Pojalo shielded his daughter with his body.

The lion struggled to get out from under Briggan's jaws. Rollan realized that the wolf was just holding it by the nape, like an errant puppy; the lion wasn't even bleeding. When Briggan experimentally loosened his grip, the lion bounded free. Hissing, the cat staggered to the exit and limped out of sight.

For a few seconds, all anyone could do was stand in a circle and breathe at one another.

Then Pojalo spoke: "I need to repair my palisade."

"What?" Rollan muttered under his breath, "no thank-you gift?"

"We can help you," Tarik said, pointedly raising his voice so it covered Rollan's. "We should all go now and rig something to secure the village from attack."

"I do not want your help," Pojalo said. "What I want is for you to leave."

Tarik shook his head in resignation. "You're making a mistake. But we will respect your wishes."

Rollan was only half listening. He had Essix in his arms, inspecting her wing

bones and feathers for damage. She seemed fine, but was clearly enjoying the preening, making quiet little screeches. Only recently had the falcon seemed to appreciate being groomed and touched by him. First letting Rollan see through her eyes, and now this. Perhaps everyone was changing.

In fact, it was *Conor* who began yelling at the chieftain. *Conor!*

The boy positioned himself in front of Pojalo, whipping his green cloak behind him in indignation. “I’m not leaving until I say what I came here to say. I stood by and watched while you denied us the help we asked. I stayed silent while you made the wrong choice for your people. But we just fought off a lion to save you, and I will not let you push us out of here before I tell you what happened to Abeke!” He paused. “Sir!”

Pojalo’s and Soama’s faces went stony. Tarik placed an arm around *Conor*’s shoulder, but Rollan realized with surprise that it was a gesture of support, rather than disapproval.

Conor’s face turned pleading. “Your daughter’s been captured by the Conquerors. We don’t know if she’s alive or dead. Please, tell us you care about her, so if we see her again, I can tell her that her father loves her.”

“It is clear to me that you will do whatever you want,” Pojalo said curtly. “And you will tell Abeke whatever you want to tell her. I do not need to go about explaining myself to you, and I don’t need to send coddling words to my daughter. She’s made her choices.”

Conor appeared stricken. The defiant gleam in his eye was replaced by something else, a look not dissimilar to the dull grief that *Irtike* wore. Rollan wondered if it had ever occurred to his friend that some parents might not love their children. He hadn’t grown up seeing what Rollan had.

“Then there’s no point in speaking further,” *Conor* muttered, the fight draining from his voice. “He’s right — we should leave.”

Briggan growled approvingly, nuzzling *Conor*’s hand.

They left the hut and went out into the night.

“It’s unbelievable,” *Conor* said once they were outside, gazing up at the sky. “How could he not care about his own daughter?”

“He’s in pain,” *Tarik* said simply. “And the future of *Okaihee* looks very grim. It’s hard to know what he’s thinking in such a state. Whatever it is, he

clearly doesn't see a need to explain it to us."

Conor bit back whatever he was about to say next.

Tarik tousled Conor's hair. "I'm proud of you," he said. "Sometimes the most important part of leadership is knowing when to let people have a piece of your mind."

Conor nodded thoughtfully, and for once he didn't blush from the praise.

Leadership? Rollan wondered, rolling his eyes. Tarik never spoke to Rollan about leadership. But then again, Conor was the one wearing the green cloak. Rollan wasn't cut out for that sort of thing. It was trouble enough staying alive and keeping an eye out for all the people who might suddenly betray him, without worrying about setting an example for everyone else.

Rollan rubbed the corner of his own slate gray cloak between thumb and forefinger. He wouldn't be turning it in for a green one anytime soon.

"So what do we do now?" he asked, if only to remind them he was still standing there.

"We learned one valuable piece of information here tonight," Tarik said. "Animals from across Nilo are on their way south to Cabaro." Tarik turned to Conor. "What do you think we should do?"

Conor considered it. "Our first priority should be the talisman. If the Conquerors get ahold of that, all of Erdas is lost."

Tarik nodded grimly.

"Sounds good to me too," Rollan grumbled. "Not that anyone asked."

As they crossed to the southern edge of the village, Rollan found his mind drifting again. The lion in Pojalo's hut had been scrawny and half-starved — but it had held its own against the three of them, not to mention Briggan and Essix.

What would fighting a healthy, full-sized lion be like? What would fighting a *Great Beast*-sized lion be like?

Rollan knew their only choice was to find Cabaro before the Conquerors did. But all the same, he wasn't so sure that he wanted to. Not so sure at all.



3 SNAKE EYES

CONOR COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY ANY PARENT WOULD willingly forsake a child. He knew that, as chieftain, Pojalo had many responsibilities. The welfare of Okaihee was first on his mind. But still ...

Lost in thought, Conor tripped on a root. Cursing, he massaged his toes for a moment and then continued forward. They were marching through the nighttime savannah, and though there was plenty of moonlight it was hard to distinguish roots from the surrounding ground. Conor took a moment to look up at the bright, scattered stars and center himself, then hustled forward.

Abeke had always talked glowingly about her family. The Soama she'd described was so elegant, her father so wise. Now he'd finally met them, and rather than being impressed, all Conor felt was bitter.

Family had a peculiar hold on people, that was for sure. Conor knew that well, having given up the Iron Boar of Rumfuss to protect his own. All the same, he wished Abeke were with them now. He'd tell her not to take her father's disinterest personally. She'd become like a sister to him, to all of them, and anyone could see what an extraordinary person she was.

Conor's eyes stung as he thought again of the two voices that were missing from their journey, voices that might have been stilled forever, for all he knew.

He took a moment to look into the night sky and mouth some words.

Somewhere, Abeke might be seeing the same stars. *Stay strong, Abeke. Keep Meilin safe. Help her forgive herself.*

“Hey, dreamer boy! Pick up the pace!” Rollan said, stumbling into Conor’s back and cuffing him on the shoulder. Conor shook his head and renewed his focus, stealing forward into the night. Up at the front, Briggan was alert. His ears were perked, the better to lead the band. But that didn’t mean Conor could allow himself to be anything less than vigilant in the dangerous countryside.

Once Conor had forced his thoughts back to their immediate surroundings, his senses benefitted more fully from his affinity with Briggan. The smells of the ground varied: from the crisp smell of parched grass to the nutty flavors of exposed roots. There were the musky smells of underground creatures and the slightly blander, watery fragrance of a termite mound. Even in the near-blackness, Conor could move quickly between the scents.

Tarik had decided that they would travel only during the nighttime, to maximize their chances of avoiding Conqueror patrols. It meant losing the advantage of sight, however, making Briggan’s sense of smell essential to their safety. With Briggan right in front of him, Conor found that his footsteps were surer. Tarik and Rollan followed behind, stepping only where Briggan and Conor did.

They couldn’t be more than a few miles south of Okaihee, but already the landscape was changing. The grassy smell began to hit Conor only rarely, replaced by a pungent, acidic fragrance, like aloe. Conor suspected they were approaching the jungle. Briggan must have sensed it too, as he slowed and came to a gradual halt. The wolf was comfortable traveling the grassland at night, but the jungle was something else entirely.

“The landscape is changing,” Conor announced, beckoning his friends in near.

“Do you sense any Conquerors around?” Tarik asked, his voice so close Conor could feel his breath on his throat.

Conor sniffed the air — he could smell animals near, but no people. “No,” he said.

Tarik lit a torch, and the glow bathed the faces of the three humans, the glittering eyes of the wolf, and the warm and mischievous eyes of Lumeo. The

otter was wrapped around the back of Tarik's neck. With a whoosh, Essix appeared out of the night sky and settled on Rollan's shoulder. Conor jumped.

"Don't worry. I'll never get used to that either," Rollan said.

"By my memory of Niloan geography, if we're near the jungle, then we've made good progress toward the talisman," Tarik said. "Cabaro is thought to live in an oasis in the desert south of the jungle."

"*Thought* to?" Rollan asked, raising an eyebrow. Essix tweaked his ear with her beak. "Ow! What was that for?"

"Maybe she wants you to respect your elders," Tarik said dryly.

"Fine," Rollan said, rubbing his ear. "That hurt!"

Essix gave him an affectionate nuzzle while Tarik pivoted with the torch, scanning the area. "I was hoping there'd be someplace nearby where we could hide out during the day. But this stretch of savannah is wide open. We could move forward into the jungle and camp there, but I don't relish that idea."

"It's our best option," Conor said. "We can't safely camp out in the open like this. The Conquerors could spot us the moment dawn broke."

Tarik shook his head. "Leopards hunt the jungle at night, and they won't be friendly like Uraza. If we get eaten by jungle creatures, the Devourer can take his time getting the talismans he needs to free Kovo. We should stop now and find the best shelter we can, or at least some cover."

"But there *is* no cover," Rollan said. He continued grumpily: "I'll sleep wherever you order me to, my dear generals."

Conor shot him a what's-got-you-so-cranky? look. But it wasn't hard to figure out. Abeke was missing ... and Meilin. They were traveling all night and sleeping fitfully during the day. Conor knew he was grumpy too, somewhere deep inside, but he'd resolved not to let his own bad mood near the surface.

"Briggan and I can scout while you two boil water for our meal," Conor said. "There has to be a stand of trees somewhere around here." Conor didn't love the idea of wandering the dark savannah, even with the aid of wolf senses, but there wasn't much choice. Could Briggan's acute sense of smell pick up a cobra or a black mamba? He wondered what a snake even smelled like.

"Did you hear that?" Rollan hissed, unsheathing his long dagger. Trusting his friend's instincts, Conor loosened the hand ax at his belt. Soon he heard it too

— a chattering sound, coming from the north. Heading right for them.

“What is it?” Tarik said. His eyes scanned the dark. Lumeo stood on Tarik’s shoulder and arched his back, hackles raised and teeth bared.

The smell was a little musty, with undertones of fruit. “Monkeys,” Conor breathed. “I think they’re monkeys.”

“Lots and lots of monkeys,” Rollan said.

“Oh,” Tarik said as the first animal appeared at the edge of the torchlight. “Those are baboons. Not usually dangerous. Everyone hold still.”

The first baboon, a swollen pregnant female with another infant on her back, passed right between them, ignoring the travelers as fully as if they’d been trees. Then the next baboons came, a pair of juveniles no higher than Conor’s knee. One paused for a moment to stare up at him with its pinched brown eyes, before continuing south.

“More animals on a mission,” Rollan said. “And heading south, like the rest, if I’m judging the direction right.”

Tarik’s face went stony as he peered into the torchlight. “Many, *many* animals heading south.”

Four baboons soon became ten, then dozens and hundreds. It was a large troop of them, sweeping across the grassland in one unbroken mass. They shrieked loudly, squabbling with one another as they moved.

Then the full horde was suddenly upon them. They were on all sides, so there was nowhere to run; all Conor could do was drop to his knees and cover his head as the flood crawled over him. Tiny fingernails poked his scalp and neck and picked at his shirt. Conor waved his hand ax in the air, hoping it would frighten them off, but it did little good.

Fingers reached into his pockets and under his shirt. Probably searching for food, Conor realized. He held his satchel tightly to his chest. Inside it was the Granite Ram of Arax. That was a treasure he would lose his life defending, if need be. He dropped his hand ax and used his shepherd’s crook instead to ward off any baboons that got too close. At least the monkeys saw him as an obstacle, rather than a target — if they decided to attack, this horde could rip them all to shreds.

Rollan cried out. Conor looked up, his vision nearly obstructed by the mass

of baboons. First he saw Briggan, shaking every once in a while like he was drying from a swim, each ferocious quiver sending any baboons that had crawled onto him flying off. Tarik and Lumeo were faring better. Tarik was picking the monkeys off like ticks and throwing them away from him. Lumeo was latched onto his head, swiping his claws at any baboons that came too near.

Rollan, though, must have lost his footing — he was sprawled on his back, covered in the baboons that were tromping over him. He held something aloft, desperate to keep it out of the monkeys' reach — the Coral Octopus of Mulop.

Conor edged toward him, but every place he tried to put his foot seemed to already have a monkey underneath. All he needed was to fall over too. Then the baboons could steal the Granite Ram and the Slate Elephant along with the Coral Octopus.

A cry broke the night sky, and suddenly Conor's view was full of falcon feathers. Essix soared in and plucked a baboon from Rollan, flew a few feet away, and dropped it into the frenzied mass before heading back for another. There were plenty of baboons to replace each one she removed, though, and Rollan was having more and more trouble keeping the talisman away from the swarm. An elderly baboon, with ragged ears and drooping lips, lunged for it.

"Essix!" Conor called. "The talisman! Grab the talisman instead!"

On her next pass, the falcon went straight for Rollan's hand. Her talons clenched the Coral Octopus's rawhide cord, and then she was aloft. She hung a dozen feet up in the air, wings beating furiously. Conor sensed her indecision; surely what she wanted most was to save Rollan — but the Coral Octopus was even more important. The baboons, lustful at the sight of the shiny treasure, made running leaps and tried to catch it, but they came far short each time.

None of the baboons wanted the treasure enough to break off their southerly journey, though. They'd make a few lunges, then move on. The horde began to thin out, and Conor was able to pick his way along the ground to Rollan's side.

The last baboons were the youngest, small juveniles that scampered to catch up to their parents. One tiny baboon ran up Tarik's back, only to be rewarded with a swipe across the face from Lumeo's paw. It squeaked in surprise, then scampered off into the night to catch up to its troop.

"That," Rollan said, panting, "was *insane*." With a cry of agreement, Essix

dropped the talisman, then landed on a nearby branch and began preening her baboon-ruffled feathers back into order.

Conor handed the Coral Octopus back to Rollan, then secured the Slate Elephant in his satchel, alongside the Granite Ram. He then checked himself and Briggan for wounds. They had plenty of scratches, and Briggan's eye was half-lidded where it must have been poked, but there were no serious injuries.

"We need to find some shelter," Conor finally said to Tarik.

"Perhaps I can help," came a small voice out of the darkness.

Tarik jerked in surprise and Rollan leaped into the air, Essix right beside him, screeching and beating her wings. Barely having caught his breath, Conor struggled to get his hand ax out and at the ready. "Who's there?"

Conor thought he recognized the voice, but it wasn't until she emerged into the torchlight that he realized who it was for sure. "Irtike?"

The skinny Okaihee girl looked worn and tired, hobbling forward on scratched bare feet. "Yes," she said simply, clasping her hands at her waist.

"Did you follow us all the way from your village?" asked Conor.

She nodded. "The chieftain ordered me to stay. But my mother was ... If you're going into Conqueror territory, I want to go with you. My heart lives outside of Okaihee now."

Tarik's face was unreadable, but Rollan vigorously shook his head.

"Absolutely not," he said. "You can't come with us. We've been going slowly enough." He looked at Tarik, who seemed to still be considering. "She's not even wearing any shoes, Tarik!"

Irtike spoke evenly and calmly. "I followed you easily enough, didn't I? In fact, I left hours after you did, and picked up your trail with no problem. Yours especially, Rollan. To find you, all I had to do was listen for someone howling in fear under a pile of monkeys. So who here is the liability?"

At first Rollan's face turned red, but then he broke out laughing. "Well played, Irtike."

Irtike continued. "You've been moving at night. I can understand why you would, since you don't want to be detected by the Conquerors. But you've been very fortunate to have survived so far. The Conquerors have been doing more than destroying villages — they've been force-feeding their Bile to animals,

making them into powerful monsters that will attack anyone on sight. And I shouldn't have to tell you that some of the most dangerous animals in southern Nilo are nocturnal. Leopards, lions, spiders, and snakes."

"Briggan's sense of smell keeps us safe," Conor said proudly.

"A sense of smell won't keep you from stumbling into quicksand. In Nilo, quicksand can drown a steer in seconds."

"And what, you can sense quicksand in the nighttime?" Rollan asked incredulously.

"Yes, I can," Irtike said simply. "You definitely need me."

"What is *with* the people from Okaihee?" Rollan asked, shaking his head. "So pushy."

"Irtike," Tarik said. "How exactly can you sense quicksand?"

The girl lowered her eyes shyly. "The year before she died, my mother presided over my eleventh nameday. She had me drink the Nectar of Ninani, and I summoned a spirit animal. I am the first since Abeke to do so." She turned to Tarik and bowed her head. "I hoped the Greencloaks might come for me one day."

"I suspect we would have, if we'd known," Tarik said. "But I wonder: You summoned a spirit animal, and yet Pojalo didn't consider you a candidate for the village Rain Dancer. He didn't even mention your animal. What did you summon?"

Irtike reached into a fur-lined leather bag slung across her chest and came out with cupped hands. She moved into the torchlight before she opened them. The companions slowly peered in.

Rollan yelled in disgust. "Ahh! What is that?!"

Conor had to force himself to keep his eyes on the creature. It had to be the ugliest living thing he'd ever seen. It was the size of a rat — maybe it even was a rat — but it was totally hairless. Its skin was a gooey pink color that transitioned into jaundiced yellow wherever it folded. The eyes were covered by pale membranes that made them look like ticks burrowed under the skin. The monstrous little creature had two long yellow teeth sticking out of its lower jaw. They gnashed as it sniffed the air.

"I guess you roll the dice when you summon a spirit animal, and take what

you get,” Rollan said. “Sometimes you roll snake eyes. Or, whatever kind of eyes those are.”

“Enough!” Irtike said, her brows knitted tight. “He’s the reason I’ve been able to follow you so easily. Not that I’d have had trouble following *you*, He-Who-Shrieks-At-Baboons.”

Conor forced himself to look at the creature again. “He helps you follow? But he’s ... blind,” he said.

“Exactly,” Irtike said proudly. “Naked mole rats usually spend their lives underground. Sensing vibrations is how they know the world, because there’s no light down there.”

“Sensing vibrations is no better than Briggan’s sense of smell,” Conor said defensively.

Irtike stroked the mole rat’s back. He lifted his wet nose into the air in pleasure, managing to get even uglier in the process. “That’s not true,” Irtike said. “Did Briggan allow you to *smell* that there’s a sheer cliff face fifty yards ahead? I don’t think so. My spirit animal is a leader among the mole rats. Like ants or bees, they live as a hive. He can call on other nearby mole rats to aid him. He also grants me the power to move the earth itself.”

Rollan went so pale it was visible even in the torchlight. “There’s a cliff face fifty yards ahead?”

Irtike smiled with satisfaction. “Who’s ugly now?”

“Oh, I’ll admit that your little monster is useful,” Rollan said. “But I’ll never admit that he’s anything less than one hundred percent ugly.” He glanced at it again, and shuddered. “Gah!”

“Which direction do you suggest we go?” Tarik asked.

“So I may go with you?” Irtike said shrewdly.

Conor found himself nodding before he even considered the question. Tarik paused, then also gave a quick nod. Rollan crossed his arms over his chest.

“Very good,” Irtike said. “I’ll tell you. I understand why you wanted to go into the jungle. The Conquerors can’t patrol it well, and you’d be under cover. But even Essix wouldn’t be able to see from above that the jungle floor is full of muddy cliffs and quicksand. It’s impassable. You’d die trying to cross it.”

“What do you suggest instead?” Conor asked.

“The baboons can go due south,” Irtike said, “because they travel in the treetops. Through my mole rat I sensed hoofbeats earlier. They veered left along here, then continued south a mile farther. That seems to be where all the land-bound creatures are heading. There must be some passable route that way.”

“And thus, we should follow their path,” Tarik said. “Do you agree, boys?”

Conor nodded. Rollan gave an almost imperceptible nod, shifting his dagger at his belt.

“And so it will be,” Tarik said softly.

Irtike leaned her ear next to the mole rat, then looked back up. “I can sense a softness in the soil a half mile east of here. Usually that means a fallen tree. We can probably shelter beneath it safely.”

“A wise plan,” Tarik said. But then he clasped Irtike’s shoulder and looked at her seriously. “You’ve made a courageous choice, to leave the only place you’ve known and follow us. But you should know that this quest could put you in grave danger. We’ve lost good friends to this war, Irtike. People much too young have been taken from us, perhaps forever. No one would fault you for changing your mind.”

“Thank you,” Irtike murmured. “But I’m sure of my choice. The war is everywhere here in Nilo, and I’ve lost my mother to it as well. I will travel with you and do what little I can to help.”

Tarik nodded, his expression solemn. He seemed reluctant to let go of Irtike’s shoulder, but eventually he pulled away, giving Lumeo a scratch under the chin with a sad smile.

“Say,” Rollan said, finally plucking up the courage to look at the mole rat again. “What name did you come up with for your little monster?”

Irtike shrugged. “Pojalo said he would be the one to choose a name. But he never got around to it. How did you come up with your animals’ names?”

“Briggan and Essix were named long before any of us were born,” Tarik said. “Lumeo is the brightest thing in my life, so his name was obvious to me, from the root word for *light*.” The otter curled tighter around the back of Tarik’s neck, nuzzling the underside of his chin. “Most spirit animals like to have some say in their own naming. They are not pets. They’re partners.”

“I don’t know,” Irtike said, looking at her mole rat. He bobbed his head in

the torchlight. “I’m not that good at coming up with names. And I can’t exactly ask him.”

“Snake Eyes it is, then,” Rollan said. “Hi there, Snake Eyes.” The mole rat bobbed his head in Rollan’s direction, his blind eyes pointing toward the boy. His blotchy, naked flesh went stiff, wrinkling and folding whenever the mole rat moved.

Rollan gagged. “Wow,” he said, heaving in air. “It’s worse than a walrus. I never thought I’d say it, but the thing looks *even worse than a walrus.*”

“Come on,” Tarik said, snuffing out the torch. “Let’s move toward the fallen tree Irtike located. I’d like us to be safely hidden away before dawn comes.”

Conor tapped his lips. “I think Irtike and ... Snake Eyes should be with me in the front. The breeze is at our backs, so Briggan and I can only smell what’s behind us. We’ll know if there are any more animals streaming from the north, but that’s about it.”

Tarik nodded. “Let it be so.”

“There’s really no need to worry, everybody,” Rollan said. “If we meet any wild beasts on the way, we’ll sic Irtike’s *mole rat* on them.”

They started forward again. Letting his senses merge with Briggan’s, Conor felt the night come alive. He smelled nestlings in the treetops and seeds blown from the grasses in the night winds, and earthworms burrowing up toward the starry sky.

All the while, he and his friends moved quietly over the savannah, toward Cabaro.

Toward the lion’s lair.

DREAM

MEILIN'S DREAM BEGAN WITH JHI. HERE WAS THE WIDE, furry body, and two soft round ears. Arms open, ready to embrace her.

She floated to the panda. Once she was near enough, Meilin reached out and fell deep into Jhi's pillowy warmth. At once tender and strong, the bear's arms reached around her, cradling her like a child, claws tight against Meilin's back.

Words passed from Meilin's mind to Jhi's: *Don't you hate me now, for my betrayal?* She'd never asked that before. Why hadn't she asked Jhi something so important?

The panda stared at Meilin with her wide, expressive eyes, full of compassion. Jhi didn't hate her. She must have been the last being in Erdas that didn't — Meilin included.

She wanted to sink deeper into the comfort of Jhi's soft embrace. *I am weak and powerless*, she wanted to say. *I need you to protect me.* But Meilin was a warrior, and even now couldn't bring herself to say that. She didn't need to, though: Jhi knew what she needed. The panda's arms tightened around her even more, and for a moment Meilin relaxed. But then she saw a new feeling enter Jhi's ordinarily placid eyes: fear.

A foul wind picked up. It pulled on her hair, then ripped Meilin from her spirit animal's grasp. Her fingers desperately raked Jhi's ribs as she was wrested

away. Jhi's wide silver eyes stared at her unblinkingly, the last thing Meilin saw in the darkness until they too faded from view.

Meilin slowed and stilled. Shapes formed at the murky edges of her dream and came together to reveal a man in a horned helmet, his thick arms crossed. The Devourer.

Instantly Meilin fell into her fighting stance. A quarterstaff appeared in her hands — the training bo that she hadn't seen since her youth, with grips of white cotton, stained brown in places by blood leaked from calloused knuckles — and immediately she went on the offensive. She began a combo sequence she'd once used to best her father himself in a sparring test. Jab jab roundhouse slash, jab jab roundhouse ankle.

The Devourer had a quarterstaff in his own hands now, and blocked each move with the very ones her father had once used, until Meilin dropped low, ready to uppercut. If this went like before, this was when she'd win.

But now the Devourer didn't do what her father had once done. He crouched low, like her, so that suddenly Meilin found herself staring right into the gaping black eyeholes of his mask.

They froze there, motionless, the Devourer tilting his head left and right, staring into Meilin's soul. She wanted to raise her arms to attack, but was powerless. A glow entered her vision, and she saw something shining green at the Devourer's throat. The light was chilly and beautiful. A totem shaped like a coiling beast faced her, carved from bright stone. The Jade Serpent of Gerathon.

Meilin watched in horror as talisman's face turned to stare at her. As its mouth opened.

Those blank serpentine eyes filled Meilin's vision, and then the beast was Gerathon herself, only smaller, the same size as Meilin. The cobra unhinged her mouth, and giant fangs filled the dreamspace when the serpent lunged. Meilin managed to get her hands around its neck before the fangs reached her, and was sprayed instead by a yellow-green fluid.

Bile.

It was all over her face and throat. She retched at the reek of it, and the Bile burned wherever it had contacted her skin. But she managed to keep her hands around Gerathon, right below her fanged mouth.

Meilin squeezed. Even as she did, she put a thought together: *The Jade Serpent of Gerathon. That's where the Bile comes from.*

Enraged, Gerathon opened her mouth to bite, and Meilin saw only red and bone. But she managed to keep her grasp on the thrashing beast. Sweat dotted Meilin's brow as the scaly cords of muscle under her hands shivered and struggled.

Even as Gerathon thrashed, Jhi appeared behind her, her soft placid eyes staring into Meilin's. Jhi was begging her to stop. *I can't!* Meilin wanted to cry out. *Gerathon is attacking me!*

Jhi's compassion came over her in waves, and Meilin's hands involuntarily relaxed, her grip loosening.

Gerathon struggled to make words. When the sound came out, it was a strangled rasp: *When Nectar bonds a human and animal, neither is in charge. Bile is stronger than Nectar, because it allows one will to dominate. You have always striven for mastery, Meilin. You should allow yourself to dominate Jhi, and the rest of your companions. Your caring lessens you.*

Meilin's hands itched to squeeze again, to kill Gerathon while the serpent was at this small size, and under her hands. She tightened her fingers, when suddenly Jhi attacked — not Gerathon, but Meilin! Her paws batted at Meilin's hands, trying to force her to release. The panda bellowed once, a sad and forceful wail.

The shock of it made Meilin release and fall back ... and come to consciousness on a cold stone floor.

Meilin was in a turret room. A heavy trapdoor was set in the floor, and a single window cut through the thick stone walls, narrowing to an arrow slit. Jhi was right beside her, her paw on Meilin's arm. Meilin scrambled away, and then saw the panda was relaxed, staring at her in concern. It really had been a dream. Meilin took the panda's paw in her own and exhaled slowly, trying to breathe the nightmare away.

That's when she saw Abeke.

The Niloan girl was laid out on the floor. She'd been savagely beaten. Deep scratches lined her jaw, and her arms were covered in defensive scrapes. Her throat was the worst, though: Wide bruises spread from her windpipe, ending in

finger marks that fanned out like violet moth wings.

The fingers were the size of Meilin's.

A wet sob escaped Meilin's lips. She crawled over to Abeke, crouching and nudging her on the shoulders. "Oh, no," Meilin cried. "Please, no. Please wake up, Abeke ... I'm so sorry!"

Abeke's eyes fluttered open. She saw Jhi and smiled groggily, wincing in pain.

Then Abeke saw Meilin, and her eyes widened in fear. She tried to stagger to her feet, but fell. Abeke pressed her back to the wall, holding her hands up protectively.

"No, Abeke, it's okay!" Meilin said. "It's me, just me. I won't hurt you. I swear."

Abeke slowly lowered her hands. Her body stayed rigid, though, her eyes wary. Meilin watched her friend fight to calm herself. "Meilin," Abeke said, her voice croaking and hoarse. "You were possessed again. You attacked me."

Meilin nodded gravely, wringing her hands. "I dreamed I was fighting Gerathon. I talked to her. I couldn't see you, but I ... thought it was her I was strangling. Jhi tried to warn me, but I was so confused. I'm sorry, Abeke. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," Abeke said quietly. "I understand that. But I only barely fought you off. I called your name, but you weren't reacting. It was like you couldn't hear me."

"I couldn't," Meilin said. She placed a hand on Jhi and the panda grunted in sympathy, looking at the two girls with her usual placid expression. "It was only because of Jhi that I was able to stop at all. How long was I ... not myself?"

"I don't know," Abeke said. She dabbed experimentally at her neck wounds. "I woke up to you attacking me."

Meilin put her face in her hands. "That's so terrible."

"I almost summoned Uraza," Abeke said. "But I didn't know what she would do. I was afraid she would attack you."

"You should have," Meilin said, looking at Abeke's wounds. "I can't believe I did that to you. I'd have deserved whatever Uraza did to me."

Studiously avoiding Meilin's gaze, Abeke eased to her feet, then padded

gingerly to the window. “It’s too bad this faces the outside, not the courtyard. All I can see are a dense mangrove forest and the edge of some buildings leading to docks. Judging from the sandstone walls and the trimmed mangroves, Shane was telling the truth: We’re in a wealthy Niloan manor.”

Not knowing what to say, Meilin ran her fingers through Jhi’s fur. The panda grunted with pleasure.

They’d been in their cell two days, with nothing to eat or drink but one bucket of watery oats Shane had brought. Meilin wished she knew what the Devourer had in mind. Maybe it was simply to keep them out of the way while the Conquerors tracked down the remaining talismans. But from what she was learning about Gerathon, imprisonment wasn’t really her style. If all she wanted was to get them out of the way, they wouldn’t be in a cell. They’d be dead.

“We know Kovo was the mastermind behind the first great war,” Meilin said. “But I think it’s Gerathon’s talisman that actually creates the Bile. I saw it.”

“This could be useful information,” Abeke said. “I didn’t consider that you might be learning about Gerathon, that your possession might work two ways.”

“I didn’t either,” Meilin said, shrugging. “But Jhi kept showing up in my dream. My connection with her might be what allows me to reverse the direction, to empathize with Gerathon, in some strange way.” Meilin didn’t sense the serpent in her mind now, which meant the possession probably wasn’t permanent — Gerathon must have to intentionally enter her mind, not live there always.

“What we have to do,” Meilin continued, “is get the Conquerors to let you near Shane. He’s got a weak spot for you. We can use him to get us close to Gar.”

“Close to the Devourer? That’s what you want?”

“Yes. Close enough to kill him.”

Abeke looked at Meilin curiously. “I don’t think we stand a chance, Meilin. This place has to be crawling with Conquerors. Our best hope is to escape and find the others.”

Meilin stared at her fists. “That’s *your* best hope, Abeke, and I plan on making sure it happens. But I can’t run away. I’m a danger to you — it’s my fault you’re even in this mess. All I can hope is to strike quickly and provide

enough of a distraction for you to escape.”

Abeke opened her mouth to protest, but paused.

She knows I'm right, Meilin thought.

They settled into an uncomfortable silence. For a few minutes Jhi licked the wounds on Abeke's neck, and Meilin was heartened to hear Abeke sigh in relief. Then, once she'd healed Abeke as much as she could, Jhi sprawled out between the girls like a rug, looking from one to the other and back again.

Sometime later, when the sun was high in the sky, they heard a sound from the trapdoor. It opened an inch, and a familiar voice called out.

Shane.

“I'm coming up. But you should know that there are a half dozen guards with me. So don't try anything.”

The girls exchanged a look, and Meilin nodded her assent.

“Okay,” Abeke said. “We won't.”

“And no spirit animals,” Shane said. “If I see them out, I lock the trapdoor and leave.”

Meilin nodded again at Abeke. “Uraza is already dormant,” Abeke called. “Meilin's taking Jhi into her passive form now.”

Meilin held out her arm and nodded to Jhi. The panda stared back at her, her jaw moving back and forth, like she was chewing bamboo. Meilin shook her arm. “Jhi! I'm not kidding around!”

Jhi kept staring. Meilin knew she could force the panda to go dormant, but she had never seen Jhi resist like this. A horrible thought struck her: Maybe Jhi didn't trust her anymore.

“Please, Jhi,” Meilin pleaded. “Don't make me do it.”

Jhi stayed motionless, but the silver eyes that met Meilin's were full of accusation. The message was clear: Only one of them could *make* the other do anything.

Meilin took a deep breath, summoned all her will, and compelled Jhi to go dormant. It felt strange and awful, like she was jamming her best friend into a box two sizes too small. There was a burning sensation on Meilin's arm and Jhi was gone, replaced by a tattoo. Meilin imagined that even the tattoo panda was looking at her reproachfully.

Abeke watched Meilin in silence for a moment, her expression somewhere between pity and horror. “Okay,” Abeke said finally, averting her eyes. “Our spirit animals are away.”

Shane poked his head in. All Meilin could see of him were two eyes and a fringe of blond hair. “Against the wall,” he ordered. “Um, please.”

The trapdoor opened farther, and Shane hopped off the ladder and into the cell, his tall frame reaching from the floor almost to the ceiling. Abeke and Meilin stared at him. Meilin could sense Abeke’s softness, and it worried her. Even if Shane was the kindest of their captors, Abeke needed to be using him, not falling for him.

Shane stood there, arms crossed over his powerful chest, his saber prominent at his hip. “So ...” he said, trailing off awkwardly. He coughed. “My uncle has summoned you to an audience. I’ve been asked to bring you to him.”

“And if we refuse?” Abeke asked.

Shane cast his eyes to the floor, as if in pain. “Please don’t refuse. The moment you refuse to do something Uncle Gar asks, I’ve been ordered to kill you.”

THE NARROW PASS

THROUGHOUT HIS CHILDHOOD, CONOR HAD TO GET UP IN the dark to tend to his family's sheep. Over the years his body had learned to spring alive the moment the night bleached even a bit, waking him during the bruised half hour before dawn.

Now he and his friends traveled by night and slept during the day: Dawn was the very moment he was supposed to go to bed. Conor was finding it difficult.

After several sleepless days in the open, they'd finally managed to find shelter in a deserted village. Conor didn't need to imagine why it had been abandoned — they'd already passed squads of Conquerors transporting captured Niloans. They carted village animals too: Some growled and screeched from inside their reinforced cages, enlarged and slathering, corrupted by Bile.

It would have been hard enough for Conor to fall asleep at the very time of the day his body usually woke up. But after all he'd seen in the last days, it was nearly impossible. Long trails of human beings, starving and suffering. Fields aflame, set on fire by the Conquerors to force the people who had worked them for generations to flee.

Conor lay in a partially charred hut, with a big section of the thatched roof burned away to reveal the gray-black sky. Rollan and Tarik were already snoring, Lumeo snuggled down in the space between them. Irtike lay quietly on

her back, eyes closed, Snake Eyes dozing at her collar. Conor didn't know her well enough to be able to tell whether she was really asleep or just hoping for it.

Essix was tracing wheels in the sky, only occasionally coming into view through the gaping roof. The falcon, as ever, was essential for keeping them safe while they rested.

Conor wished for sleep. With one hand in Briggan's fur, he lost himself in the wispy, pinkish clouds, a few pinpoints of stars still visible behind them. He relaxed.

Until the birds came.

At first Conor didn't know what he was hearing. The sky filled with a dull buzzing, and then the animals began to rush past, heading south. Conor thought it was a flock of swallows — he'd seen them fly past his village in Eura twice a year, blackening the sky for a few minutes on their way to distant places. But these weren't swallows. They were too small, almost the size of insects.

Then he realized what he was seeing: hummingbirds. Thousands of hummingbirds in glittering blues, greens, and reds, flocking through the sky.

Parrots followed, bright green except for the occasional orange blur, all single-mindedly flying south toward Cabaro's oasis, one nearly on top of the next.

Conor considered waking up the others, but they were sleeping so soundly, and needed their rest. So he watched the unfurling fabric of greens and oranges, listened to its squawking roar.



He must have fallen asleep, because sometime in the middle of the afternoon Conor was awakened by a strange tearing noise, like someone was ripping apart a shirt. Conor shot bolt upright and came face-to-face with Essix. The falcon was sitting in the scrap of bare earth that was still available in the small hut, making a meal of a parrot. Conor turned his face away and closed his eyes. "Essix, come on, can't you do that outside?"

When he looked back, the parrot was eaten, bones and all, and Essix was peering at Conor with quizzical eyes, head tilted. *What's the big problem?*

Conor wondered why Essix was no longer in the sky, but he didn't have the

kind of shorthand with the falcon that Rollan did. So he was relieved when Essix woke Rollan up by giving him a swift peck.

“Hey!” Rollan said, sitting up and rubbing his cheek. He looked at Essix’s expression, watching as the falcon cast her gaze outside. Rollan’s own face went from furious to intrigued. “Wake up Irtike and Tarik,” he said. “It seems Essix has found something we should see.”

They were mobilized and on the move within minutes. In the daylight, Conor and Irtike took the middle, with Tarik leading and Rollan at the rear, long dagger in hand. There were enough stands of baobab trees dotting the landscape that they could take shelter as they went, hiding in the shade and waiting for Essix’s piercing cry to let them know it was safe to make the trek to the next hiding spot.

Essix leading the way, the companions began to ascend, following a rocky dry streambed through yellow nettles until they were on a rise. After hiding themselves in a tuft of tall, dry sawtooth grass, they eyed a narrow pass through the cliffs.

“Oh,” Rollan whispered. “That’s ... How awful.”

The pass was the only way through the cliffs for miles around, and it showed. There had clearly been many recent bloodbaths. Carcasses lined the sides, the bodies of everything from warthogs to hyenas to monitor lizards. Even humans. The narrow path that remained was rust-colored, the sand and stones soaked in blood.

“How did all those creatures die?” Conor asked.

“I think we’re about to find out,” Tarik said, pointing to the entrance of the narrow pass.

A herd of wildebeests was approaching, kicking up a cloud of heavy brown dust in the dry savannah. As they neared, a group of mounted Conquerors, clad in their black oiled leather uniforms and sewn-on breastplates, emerged from a hiding spot in the cliff side and began to ride along with them. They expertly navigated the sprinting mass, seamlessly joining the wildebeests.

As the herd neared the pass, it didn’t slow at the bottleneck. Wildebeests were crushed against the side of the canyon or lost under stampeding hooves. “That’s why all those animals died,” whispered Conor. “They’ve gone mindless.

It's terrible."

"I don't think that's all that's killing them," Irtike said, pointing at the far end of the pass.

Ostriches emerged from their own hiding places at the far cliffs, standing in a straight line before the stampeding wildebeests and the Conquerors among them. Once the first animals neared, the ostriches turned so their backs were to them. They peered over their tail feathers and each lifted a leg, as if taking aim. Conor cringed, waiting for the powerful birds to strike out at the witless wildebeests.

"Really?" Rollan asked. "Attack ostriches? Is that a thing?"

"Ostriches are some of the deadliest animals in all of Nilo," Tarik said grimly. "Watch and learn."

The first wildebeest arrived at the ostrich line. The birds didn't attack it, though — they let the animal pass right between them.

When the first Conqueror on horseback arrived, however, the nearest ostrich used one burst from its wings to rise into the air. Its leg lashed out, thick muscles evident even from a distance. The clawed foot struck the Conqueror squarely in his helmet and he went flying, impacting the cliff wall with a thud audible even over the stampede. The helmet was dented all the way in; the Conqueror must have been killed instantly.

His steed, though, was allowed to pass right through. The horse joined the herd of wildebeests, at least those that had survived trampling, and streamed out to the south.

The next Conqueror to reach the ostrich line tried to veer away, but the wildebeest herd was tight around her. She was drawn forward and met a similar end, kicked in the head by an ostrich. Even Tarik had to look away.

Eventually the Conquerors were all felled, their horses liberated, and the surviving wildebeests were a cloud in the far distance. The ostriches retreated to either side of the canyon.

"Now," Rollan said, "anyone want to tell me what for the love of Mulop just happened?"

"I have a theory," Conor said.

"So do I," Tarik said, nodding approvingly. "Go on, tell yours first."

“Clearly the Conquerors joined that herd intentionally. They thought they could pass by the ostriches if they were intermingled with wild animals. Only it didn’t work. The ostriches picked them off.”

“Yes,” Tarik said excitedly. “Exactly. Only animals are being allowed to pass. But no Conquerors.”

“No humans in general,” Irtike said, pointing at the bodies at the side of the canyon. “There’s tribal clothing down there. Not just Conqueror gear.”

“That fits what we know of Cabaro,” Tarik said. “He hates humans. Perhaps he wishes for a kingdom in which there are only animals.”

“He appears to be getting his wish,” Irtike said grimly.

“This cliff goes for miles,” Rollan said. “The Granite Ram might get us across, if Essix ferried it between us. Or she could carry us over one by one if we used the Slate Elephant to enlarge her.”

“But these ostriches are likely only an advance guard,” Tarik said. “Cabaro has made his purpose clear. Humans are not welcome. We will be attacked on sight.”

“Not all of us,” Conor mused. “Briggan and Lumeo would pass by fine.”

“And Snake Eyes,” Irtike said defensively, brandishing the mole rat.

“Agh, warn me before you pull that thing out!” said Rollan.

“Right, and Snake Eyes,” Conor said, averting his eyes from the hideous creature. “In any case, it’s just *people* who have trouble getting through. Like us.”

Tarik nodded wearily, peering down at the carnage, his lips a grim line. Conor knew how much the loss of Abeke and Meilin weighed on him, though Tarik never said as much. Conor just wished he had some way of convincing Tarik that he wasn’t personally responsible for everything that happened to them.

Conor turned various strategies over in his mind, but none of them held much hope. There was one option left, though clearly no one wanted to say it. Conor hated even the thought of it, but at the same time it seemed the only way forward. He cleared his throat, and the others looked at him. Laying a hand atop Briggan’s furry head, Conor scratched between the wolf’s ears. Briggan’s back leg twitched in pleasure, just like Conor’s old sheepdog’s would have done. He and Briggan had been parted once before, to save Rollan’s life in Pharsit Nang. It

had been nearly unbearable. Conor wondered if it was more than his heart could take to do it again. But they had no other choice.

“So that’s it, then,” Conor said. “We send our spirit animals on. Alone.”



ROLLAN WATCHED CONOR EXPLAIN THE PLAN TO Briggan. The wolf sat at strict attention, his blue eyes never wavering from Conor's. His head would tilt once in a while when he wasn't sure about something, but otherwise the former Great Beast stared deep into Conor's eyes, soaking in every signal he could get off his companion.

Essix, meanwhile, wouldn't be staring dutifully into Rollan's eyes any time soon. No human boy was going to be the boss where a falcon was concerned, and Rollan was just fine with that. She was high in the sky, searching for prey. Irtike carried Snake Eyes close to her, giving the falcon a worried look. He was a perfect Essix-snack size.

Tarik, meanwhile, couldn't stop pacing. Clearly he was no great fan of their plan. It was risky and unusual, and if there was something Rollan had learned about Tarik by now, it was that he liked to do things by the book.

Leaving Essix to her hunting, Rollan went to Tarik's side. "You're not feeling good about this, huh?" he asked.

Tarik crossed his heavy arms. Under the intense Niloan sun, Rollan could see the deep lines around the man's mouth. "Not at all," Tarik sighed. "Cabaro is the most powerful foe we've faced yet. You saw that scraggly lion in Pojalo's hut, and how much trouble it gave us. A full-grown lion might have bested us,

and Cabaro is far bigger than a usual lion. Only Suka could rival him for strength, and Cabaro is many times more agile. Briggan might stand a chance in combat if Conor used the Slate Elephant, but even then, wolves must usually work together to bring down larger prey. He'll be outmanned. And Essix ..."

"She's made for smaller prey too," Rollan said defensively. "It's not her fault. And none of the Four Fallen are as large as the rest of the Great Beasts. But what else can we do? They're the only ones who can approach him without getting kicked in the heads by crazy attack chickens."

"I agree with you," Tarik said wearily. "Which is why I'm allowing this. But all the same, I don't like it."

"Well, we can never know what they're going to find out there. Who knows how Cabaro will react to seeing Briggan and Essix again after all these years?"

Tarik stared out at the desert laid out before them, then unexpectedly laid his hands on Rollan's shoulders. "Rollan. You haven't mentioned Meilin since we left Oceanus."

Rollan's jaw clenched on its own. "Meilin? Why are you bringing her up?"

Tarik ruffled his hair. "You've been distracted the whole time we've been in Nilo. Just a suspicion that she might be on your mind. I know she and Abeke are on mine."

Of course Meilin was on his mind. All the time. But that didn't mean he wanted to *talk* about it.

"We'll find her," Tarik said. "And Abeke."

Rollan doubted it. And even if they did find Meilin, what would they do with her? At any moment Gerathon could take her over and have her beat them to the ground with her hands tied behind her. It all made the prospect getting his friend back pretty bleak. He bit back a caustic reply.

Tarik sighed. "I'm going to tell you something that very few people know. I had a sister once, named Reima. She was three years younger than me, but we were inseparable. Reima was mature, and whip-smart. My parents scrimped and saved just to send her to school. Of the two of us, it seemed she had the brighter future."

Tarik steeled his gaze toward the horizon as he continued. "As you've seen, not all families are happy when a child calls a spirit animal. For most, having a

child join the Greencloaks means losing him or her. My parents operated a carpet shop and had counted on me to run it so that they could retire — they were quite old by then. But Lumeo came to me in my Nectar Ceremony, and that changed everything.”

At the mention of his name, Lumeo popped his head out of Tarik’s bag, peering curiously with his bright eyes. Rollan stroked Lumeo under his chin, and the otter closed his eyes as he basked in the pleasure of it.

“Reima was delighted,” Tarik continued. “She loved Lumeo as much as I did. Secretly I wanted to join the Greencloaks, to use my new link with Lumeo to do good in the world. But I was also ashamed of that dream. Leaving would mean letting my family down. I never shared my hopes with Reima, but she knew. Without my knowledge, she told our parents she wanted to quit her schooling and work in the shop instead. They believed her — and when she took over the family business, I was free to join the Greencloaks.”

“She sacrificed her future,” Rollan said. “For you.”

Tarik nodded and lifted the hem of his cloak into the sunlight. “She gave up much so that I could wear the green. Perhaps too much. Every morning, I silently thank her. Every evening too, before I sleep. She’s always on my mind, even though, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, I don’t speak of her. What she means to me, the importance of what she did, is a weight that I keep private. It is mine to bear, and sometimes that makes it seem more pure, more sacred.”

Rollan nodded, thoughtful.

“But that’s not the only way,” Tarik said. “If your burdens become too heavy, you should also know when to share your pain or worries.” Tarik placed a hand gently on Rollan’s shoulder, smiling softly. “As I’ve just done with you. You have that option too.”

“Okay, old man,” Rollan said, ducking from under Tarik’s arm. “Keep talking like that and maybe someday I’ll become a Greencloak after all.”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” Tarik said. “Those offers expire. Limited time only. Maybe you could try to join next year.”

“Right,” Rollan said, cuffing him on the shoulder. Then he paused. “You said you *had* a sister. What happened to her?”

Tarik’s smile flickered for a moment. “That’s a burden I’m not quite ready to

part with,” he said. “Another time, perhaps.”

Rollan nodded.

“Hey, guys!” Conor shouted. “We’re ready.”

“Essix,” Rollan called sharply. “Make room in your head. I’m coming in!”

The falcon, busy trying to cave in a particularly promising rodent mound, gave a frustrated cry and then flew to Rollan’s shoulder.

“Okay,” Rollan said to Tarik, clasping his arm warmly. “Are you sure no Lumeo?”

“There’s a broad desert on the other side of the pass,” Tarik said. “Lumeo is a water animal. I can’t imagine him enjoying that crossing one bit.”

“Well, I still think we should send the mole rat,” Rollan said dryly. “Every adventuring party needs a mole rat.”

“Hey!” Irtike said. “Snake Eyes is too small for this fight. He stays here.” From somewhere deep in her bag, Snake Eyes squeaked defiantly.

“Fine, then. Get ready, everyone. I’m going in,” Rollan said. He stared deep into Essix’s eyes, and felt himself grow lighter. As his sight merged with the gyrfalcon’s, there was a curious, tense feeling in his belly. He watched through Essix’s precise vision as Tarik took Rollan’s own limp body and lay it flat on the ground, placing a bag under his head as a pillow.

Essix took flight, and Rollan’s mind was fully in her light, strong body. His pulse thrummed with joy when they hit the air currents over the canyon.

Rollan’s link with the falcon was stronger than ever, but it still only went in one direction. He could see everything the bird saw, and even shared some of her falcon-y instincts, including an innate sense of up- and downdrafts. There was something relaxing to having no control. The only job Rollan had in the world was to experience the thrill of soaring hundreds of feet over the earth.

Essix found a warm updraft and used it to rise higher in the column of air. She was able to control her altitude by easing in and out of the current while she flew. The tight circle of her vision danced around, soon focusing in on Briggan. The wolf loped down the scrubby hill and to the entrance of the narrow passage. He paused, bobbing his head — Rollan could only imagine how strong the carnage below would smell to a wolf — and then Briggan continued forward, not flagging even when the ostriches came out of their hiding places to face him

down.

Undeterred, Briggan strode forward. Rollan could sense Essix's shoulder muscles tense as she prepared to dive at the ostriches if they attacked.

The ostriches turned, staring backward, their powerful back legs at the ready. If they struck out, nothing Essix could do would save Briggan — the first foot that connected with the wolf would likely shatter his ribs.

The birds tensed as Briggan loped nearer and nearer, their wings rising as they prepared to take to the air for extra power, their lethal legs cocked and at the ready.

Bird and wolf came closer and closer ... and then Briggan was in among them.

He went right through. They'd let him pass.

Distantly, from the ears of his own body, Rollan could hear the muffled cheers of Tarik and Conor and Irtike. But Essix wasn't wasting any time celebrating. She left the column of air and glided across the hot desert, keeping Briggan squarely in view below.

Soon after they'd left the cliff passage behind, the desert widened to the horizon. The sky was a brilliant, hot blue. Rollan could feel the heat on Essix's feathers, warming their dark centers and radiating out to the white tips. The nibs retracted into the bird's skin with a prickling sensation, as Essix flattened them so they'd trap less heat.

When Essix peered down at the wolf, Rollan could see that Briggan was having a hard time. The falcon's keen vision caught the dry patches on Briggan's tongue where it lolled heavily from one side of his mouth. He panted as he loped forward, his chest rapidly rising and falling as he shifted his gait into a sort of leaping walk. Rollan could only imagine how hot the sand was under his paws, which were adapted to the dark cool forests of central Eura.

The unending desert was beautiful, but that was a cruel consolation to its true nature. The place was a graveyard. The sand was dotted by the brilliant white skulls and rib cages of the many beasts that hadn't survived their brutal journey south. In the distance Rollan could see what looked like giants' bones, but when Essix focused in, Rollan realized they were strange columns of white minerals. Rollan wouldn't have recognized the material if they hadn't just come

from Oceanus — it was coral.

Once, this must have been an ocean. They were the same distance from the pole as Oceanus; maybe Mulop had once swum around here. But now it was desert, and it was the lair of Cabaro.

It was hard to imagine why the Great Lion would want to live out here. It was a barren wasteland, without even scraps of vegetation for shade. Hidden away from the human world, yes, but hardly a suitable stronghold for a Great Beast.

Essix's attention went more and more frequently to Briggan. Rollan could see why the falcon was worried. The wolf was slowing. Not too noticeably, not yet, but if stalwart Briggan was dragging, he must be suffering indeed. Surrounded by the skeletal reminders of the animals that hadn't survived the journey, Rollan wondered if perhaps they should cancel their plan and bring Briggan back.

But then, right in front of Rollan, Briggan doubled in size. The wolf seemed as surprised as he was, skidding in the sand and nearly falling flat on his face. Then Briggan stood, shook his fur free of dust, and started forward again, this time at twice the speed.

Of course, Rollan thought, *Conor just realized he should put on the Slate Elephant. Why didn't we come up with that before?* Maybe Tarik had been right that Rollan was distracted by thoughts of Meilin these days.

In his new giant form, Briggan actually seemed to enjoy the journey. He quickened his strides, leaping between dunes. Clearly no longer as worried, Essix's gaze flicked over the many skeletons they passed, maybe looking for stray bits of sun-dried meat.

As Essix soared over the unchanging desert, riding waves of dry heat, Rollan lost track of time. He only snapped out of his dreamy state when a speck of green appeared on the southern horizon. It grew larger and larger, until Essix's keen vision was able to make out dense clumps of bright green palms, surrounded by thickets of vines and rubbery bushes, birds and monkeys scampering between the fronds. Many tracks circled the ring of precious greenery.

An oasis.

It was large, hundreds of yards across. There must have been some sort of spring in the middle to provide so much lushness in the middle of the desert. A semicircle of sandstone cliffs curled around the back of the oasis, rising high above it. The beautiful ring of green was probably easy to defend, since intruders could approach from only one direction.

Essix descended, coming in to glide onto Briggan's back. The falcon cried out, and the wolf shifted his ears affirmatively. It seemed Briggan already knew what Essix was telling him. He had probably scented the oasis and figured out precisely what they were heading for.

This lush stand of greenery below the cliffs, so highly defensible, was where Cabaro had secreted himself away.

At first Rollan couldn't understand why Essix didn't rise back into the air, but as the trees rose into view, he realized how dense the foliage was. If the falcon had gone back to flying, she would have lost sight of Briggan the moment he stepped into the oasis.

It was a frustrating way to travel. Essix bobbed with each step Briggan took, sending the falcon's already jerky vision bouncing. Rollan started feeling sick to his stomach.

As they neared the oasis, Rollan recognized an elderly baboon with raggedy ears hanging in the trees, one of the same baboons that had swarmed them outside Okaihee. Once Briggan was near, the chattering creatures in the trees fell silent, and Rollan became intensely aware of their stares. Other heads emerged from between the thickets — wild dogs. The monkeys and birds fled in unison, deeper into the oasis. The dogs remained, watching the wolf nervously. Still enlarged by the Slate Elephant, Briggan was many times their size, and it seemed to have them spooked.

Briggan arrived at the oasis line, and the landscape went from empty to overfull. Water-greedy plants clogged the ground so thickly that there was no clear path for him to follow. Rollan debated returning to his own body to tell the others that Briggan was too big to enter, but decided against it. Better to give Briggan a chance to figure out a way to enter without shrinking him back to his normal size. He'd need every advantage he could get to stand a chance against Cabaro.

Sure enough, Briggan figured out a way in. The giant wolf reared on his back legs and came down on the nearest palm. Essix shrieked and took to the air as, with a great crash, the tree plummeted into the foliage, flattening the surrounding palms. Briggan picked his way along the fallen trunk and then downed another palm, Essix flapping above him the whole time. After a noise like that, every animal in the oasis had to know exactly where they were. Though he'd given up the element of surprise, Briggan had found an effective way of traveling through the oasis.

Essix nipped Briggan's ear in warning. The wolf turned, and Rollan could see that the dogs at the oasis's edge had assembled and were tailing him, crying nervously and sniffing the ground. They were small and mangy, with numerous scabby hairless spots, but there were plenty of them — at least a dozen, maybe as many as twenty. Rollan knew why Essix was concerned, but couldn't see what was to be done about the persistent dogs. At least they weren't attacking — yet.

As Briggan continued his passage, the oasis was eerily still. The advantage of Essix's vision was gone in the thick greenery — all Rollan could see were clustered leaves and the blurred legs of scurrying creatures. Beneath it all he heard Briggan's exhausted panting and the soft howls of the tailing dogs.

Finally Briggan crashed a tree that didn't lead to more greenery. The wolf stepped cautiously into a clearing.

After all that sand and heat, the oasis's center was impossibly beautiful. Water bubbled and spilled from the ground in the middle of the clearing, forming a radiant pool. Around it grew bright green mosses and ferns, overhung by desert willows. At the lagoon's edge were peacocks, tail feathers in such striking reds and greens that they seemed bejeweled.

The plump peacocks were of no interest to Essix, though. After the long trip through the desert, Rollan could sense the sole desire burning in her: to drink from the pool. He could only imagine how much furry and panting Briggan wanted to lap up some of that lagoon water too.

They would have gone right for it, if only they'd been alone.

When Essix and Briggan stepped into the clearing, sleek yellow forms picked their way out of the greenery at the far side. Powerful and sinewy, they stalked forward, eyes trained on the wolf, long front teeth displayed in warning.

Lionesses, four of them. They came to a stop, a loose clump of fierce cats between Briggan and the lagoon.

Rollan could sense Briggan's indecision. There was no need to attack the lionesses when they weren't attacking him — but the cats were blocking access to the water. Rollan remembered Lenori mentioning something else about lions. Where there was a group of lionesses, there was usually a male.

The surface of the lagoon water began to tremble and shake. Moving sinuously, Cabaro emerged from the foliage at the far side.

He was lean, and *long* — almost half again as long as Briggan, even with the Slate Elephant. Each step Cabaro took around the edge of the lagoon brought him a shocking distance. If this lion went at full speed, there was no land creature on Erdas that could escape him. No wonder he'd been able to keep his Golden Lion talisman safe for so long.

The giant lion sauntered into the midst of his lionesses, then lowered himself calmly onto the sand, tail thumping the earth. He yawned, exposing long teeth — longer even than those of Suka. He might not have the sheer muscle of the giant polar bear, but all it would take was one well-placed chomp from that mouth to be the end of Briggan. And the lion moved so liquidly, with such ease, that it seemed all he'd have to do was decide to bite and then his jaws would be wrapped around Briggan's throat.

For a long moment, Cabaro stared into Briggan's eyes. Rollan could detect a keen intelligence there, a cunning mind churning through possibilities. Then, with a throaty, velvety voice, the Great Beast spoke. "Briggan. Essix. You've come for my talisman."

Casually, Cabaro tossed his mane. When his collar of fur lifted, beneath it Rollan could see a spectacular treasure. The lion was wearing a length of gold rope, gleaming in the light. In the place of pride was a hefty gold figurine, fashioned after a yawning cat.

The Golden Lion of Cabaro.

Languidly, luxuriously, Cabaro tilted his head and licked the talisman again and again, like it was an unruly patch of hair. Then he rested back on his haunches, tossing his mane proudly. It came to rest over the talisman, shielding it from view.

“Of course, you can’t reply,” Cabaro said. “You are nothing like your former selves. I remember how proud you were, Essix. How regal, how quick-witted. Second only to Halawir the Eagle in the speed of your tongue. You might have convinced me to join your battle against the others, if Halawir hadn’t talked me out of it long before you called your Grand Council.”

Cabaro’s tawny eyes moved from Essix to the wolf beneath her. “And, Briggan — none of the Great Beasts would have claimed you were the smartest among us, but you were loyal to the end, the only one all of us trusted. Few could best you in combat, and certainly not if your Great Pack was behind you. But now you’ve returned, smaller and silent.” The lion’s eyes flashed shrewdly. “Yes, I’m aware your size is borrowed. From Dinesh, no doubt. Your new state is sad to see. You are puppets to humankind. Like so many animals. You might as well be pets or milking cows.”

Briggan and Essix held still. Suddenly it felt like there was a glass wall within Essix’s mind. It was harder for Rollan to know what the falcon was feeling on the other side.

“You are servants of the Greencloaks now, no? *You*, who need bow to no human. They speak of partnerships, of a union of souls. But what are you, really? How many decisions do the Greencloaks turn to their spirit animals to make? They call you up when they want you to risk your necks in combat. They banish you when you are no longer convenient, like a parlor trick. Do you remember the argument we had during the Grand Council? About whether the humans deserved their fate? They have only become bolder. Even more entitled. *You* are the ones with the wisdom hard won through eons of life. And yet you’re at the beck and call of humans, who have only the paltry stupidity of decades.”

Briggan growled, and Rollan realized he had no idea why. He desperately wondered what was going through the wolf’s mind. Did he agree with Cabaro?

“Look throughout Erdas,” the giant lion continued, holding up a paw and flicking his long claws in and out. “Cows are kept for milk, subverted to human needs. Pigs are chained, faithfully waiting for scraps until they are killed for a meal. Birds are crammed in cages because humans think they are beautiful. This is not a friendship, nor even the wild freedom of predator and prey — it is a system imposed by human civilization. And you are the firewood that system

burns to run. That is why I have secured this oasis. That is why my animal guards kill any human who dares approach.”

Cabaro lost his fake calm. The giant lion stood and paced, crossing the clearing and back in a few long strides, keeping Briggan and Essix in his sights the whole time. “This is one region where humans will never come. One place where they cannot chain us, fool us, mock us, dominate us. Once enough allies have arrived, we will expand, and take back the world. I invite you to stay, Essix and Briggan. Join me, and regain control of your destinies.”

Oh, no, Rollan thought, swayed by Cabaro’s words despite himself. *This could be trouble*. He’d never tried it before, but he tried to funnel thoughts to the falcon. *You are my best friend. We share a soul. I am not using you. And getting the talismans is the only way to stop Kovo and Gerathon and the Devourer. The ones who killed you so long ago. Hiding away here isn’t the answer.*

Cabaro came to a stop in front of Briggan and Essix. He was almost in striking distance.

Please, Rollan implored Essix, *we need the talisman. For all of Erdas.*

Cabaro came nearer still, and soon his nose was next to Briggan’s. His lips peeled back from his gums, into a wide and toothy grin. “We ended on bad terms, but you always preferred my company to Uraza’s, didn’t you? Do you remember, Briggan, when we used to hunt in an animal paradise, before humans came and ruined everything? But you’ve finally come around, haven’t you?”

Briggan let out a low growl.

Essix spread her wings and arrowed into the sky. The sudden change in view set Rollan reeling, his stomach in tight knots.

For a moment, the future of Erdas was literally up in the air.

To Rollan’s relief, the falcon went directly for the Golden Lion. Within seconds, she had her talons around the back of Cabaro’s mane and lifted. If she’d been the one to benefit from the Slate Elephant, she might have been able to yank out the lion’s fur and peel away with the talisman. But the heavy gold pendant was too tangled. The falcon faltered.

That was all the delay Cabaro needed. With a roar of rage, the lion turned and pivoted, doing a full rotation in the air and landing a dozen feet away, the talisman still secure. Rollan and Essix waited for the Great Beast to strike.

But, surprisingly, he held still.

Instead, the attack came from the lionesses.

During the commotion, they'd quietly flanked Briggan and Essix, stealing in from both sides. The first to reach Briggan leaped, her fangs sinking deep into his shoulder. Briggan yelped and twisted, but the lioness held on. Then another latched on, her claws raking deep into Briggan's hindquarters, and his howls became anguished.

Essix was a spear of fury, soaring into the air and diving for the first of the lionesses. The fierce cat released Briggan as she was struck in the flank, rolling along the sandy ground and lying still. By then Briggan had managed to twist enough to get another between his jaws. He plucked her from him and hurled her to one side. She too rolled and lay still.

A third lioness took advantage of Briggan's vulnerability to latch onto his throat. Feathers flying, Essix hovered in the air beside her, lashing furiously with her talons. Cuts and gashes accumulated on the lioness's body, but she held on, ears flat and eyes scrunched tight.

Meanwhile, Rollan saw that the wild dogs were accumulating at Briggan's rear, growling and whining. Then the first wild dog clamped onto Briggan's tail. Another sank its teeth into the wolf's foot, heedless of being trampled. A third bit into Briggan's hamstring.

Yelping in confusion, Briggan started sinking. The wild dogs went after his flank — six, then seven, then eight of them latched on, in addition to the exhausted lioness at the wolf's front. Flailing under the combined weight, Briggan began to teeter and pitch. If the dogs pulled him off his feet, he'd be done for. Essix abandoned the lioness and started going after the dogs, picking them off one by one. But each attacker that Essix taloned away was replaced by two more as the pack attacked in full force.

Cabaro, meanwhile, had retreated to the other side of the lagoon. The whole time, he watched and waited, following the action with apparent calm.

His heart in his throat, Rollan could only hope that Briggan and Essix somehow managed to turn the tide before the wolf succumbed.

Then, suddenly, he felt his world shake. In one wrenching and nauseating moment, he lost all his perspective, and the horizon fell away.

Abruptly Rollan was in his own body again. All he could see was Tarik right in front of him, leaning over with a concerned expression.

“What are you doing?!” Rollan shouted. “Briggan and Essix —!”

Tarik clamped a strong hand over Rollan’s mouth, his eyes flashing with urgency. “Hush! They’ll hear you.”

Rollan tried to speak, but the words were unintelligible under Tarik’s hand. He bit into Tarik’s palm.

Tarik winced, but kept his hand clamped firmly over Rollan’s mouth. Then he wrenched the boy to his feet and dragged him to where Conor and Irtike were crouched in the underbrush, staring intently at the narrow canyon pass leading to the oasis.

It was crawling with Conquerors. An army of them.



7 ASSEMBLY

THE LADDER DOWN FROM THEIR CELL WAS RICKETY AND unstable, and in her half-starved state it took Abeke a few seconds to descend it. By the time Meilin was beside her and the trapdoor was closed, Abeke had done a count of the assembled Conquerors: twelve, and five spirit animals. Nearest to her was a mean-looking creature — an animal like a huge orange rabbit, with very strong-looking legs. Perhaps it was from Stetriol, which Abeke figured was bound to have its own sorts of animals, and so its own sorts of spirit animals.

Shane had a burlap sack in each hand. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to wear these to the hall.”

Abeke shot a questioning look to Meilin, who nodded slightly. Shane placed the sacks over their heads, and the world went dim. Abeke clasped Meilin’s hand, and took comfort in how strongly Meilin held hers in return. Her hands were cool and firm, the callouses from quarterstaff training rough against Abeke’s wrist.

As she pressed near, Meilin whispered, “With a sack over my head, at least Gerathon can’t see through my eyes.”

Abeke squeezed Meilin’s palm. “I’m sure Rollan would find a joke somewhere about all this.”

“I can only imagine,” Meilin said.

Shane took Abeke's other hand. While Meilin's was cool, Shane's was warm and throbbing with life. He tugged Abeke forward almost tenderly, and Meilin followed last, pressed tightly against her friend. Abeke heard the Conquerors fall into line beside them. No one seemed permitted to talk, so all she heard were reverberating footfalls in open stone corridors. Hot Niloan sunshine warmed her arms.

Their footsteps stopped echoing, the stone replaced with grass and sand. Abeke realized they'd passed into a courtyard of some sort. There were rippled murmurs, then all went silent. "Just a few more steps," Shane said as he led Abeke and Meilin across an expanse of open ground. From the sounds around them, Abeke assumed they were in the manor's courtyard.

Abeke felt the warmth of Shane's chest as he leaned over her, and then the sack was off her head. She was right: She and Meilin were at the center of a courtyard that could only have belonged to a member of the Niloan upper crust. Living in Okaihee, Abeke had never seen so grand a home, but she'd heard of the merchant lords whose coastal villas were said to include arenas for sport and theater. Now, though, the baked-earth risers were full of men and women in Conqueror uniforms.

The assembled forces surrounded the two girls, but none made a move toward them. Their eyes were fixed on the front.

A round dais had been set up, on which stood the Conqueror leaders. At one edge was Drina, as beautiful as her brother, Shane, was handsome, but with only glimmers of his reluctant kindness. Her spider spirit animal was perched on her shoulder, motionless. At the other edge of the dais was Yumaris, the old prophetess whose earthworm spirit animal allowed her to scry locations far away. Shane stood behind her, almost hidden from view, looking somewhat sheepish, his arms crossed at his waist.

It was the beast at the center, though, that made Abeke's heart pull down tight in her chest. Gerathon was two tons of snake, black coils rasping as her muscular body curled and twisted in ever-tightening spirals. The giant cobra stared right at them, her face fixed in a leer. A large forked tongue, as wide as the trunk of a man, flicked in and out as she smelled the air. Gerathon opened her mouth, revealing flesh pink and glistening as she extended and retracted her

fangs. Even without injecting poison, a strike from those daggers would be enough to kill. The display was meant to intimidate, and it worked.

Abeke panicked. Her whole body seized, and before she could regain self-control she'd summoned Uraza. The leopard sprang to Abeke's feet and immediately started growling, pacing tight circles around her partner. Abeke hadn't felt the pain of summoning her spirit animal for a few days, and the shock of it returned her to her senses. But still — what a horror before them.

The serpent coiled around a massive man, clad in red mail with a horned helmet masking his face; all Abeke could see were two glinting eyes. She'd seen Gar in his full armor only from afar, at the Battle at Dinesh's Temple and the beach when she'd arrived. He would have been looming and impressive in any other context, a formidable opponent for any fighter. But with the serpent mantling him and eyes glinting with wicked intelligence ... all Abeke could think was that they were doomed.

“Silence!” Gar shouted.

As the crowd's murmurs quieted, Abeke managed to focus her mind. Though Gar was an impressive man, Abeke started to realize how small he looked compared to Gerathon. The Devourer appeared to be in charge, but Abeke suspected how far that went. In Oceanus, Mulop had revealed the truth about the last Devourer, King Feliandor. He was only a puppet to the schemes of Kovo and Gerathon. Maybe the same thing was happening again. If so, she resolved to find a way to use it to her advantage.

Meilin whispered into Abeke's ear, her words coming in a rush, as if she knew this might be their last chance to talk. “Zerif and Aidana aren't here anymore. They might have gone to find Cabaro's talisman. We need to find out where they are.”

Meilin sounded like Meilin again! Abeke's heart soared with the sudden hope of it. Meilin had to be intimidated as well, but she was still planning their best moves for the future. Abeke was relieved too, to see Meilin had summoned Jhi. The panda stood on all fours, like Uraza, giving Gerathon a look of layered anger. Of course the two had a long history, had once been allies — or at least brethren — until Gerathon sent the last Devourer on a mad rampage, and Jhi and Uraza had perished in the conflict.

Gar spoke, and Abeke's mind went back months before, to the day she'd first met him, before she'd joined the Greencloaks. Here was the same light but commanding voice, a grave and compelling sound. "Greencloak children. It is only right that you have brought forth Jhi and Uraza," he said. "They too should see the history occurring around them. They helped shape the world once before, and now they can watch it happen again."

The general removed his helmet, and Abeke saw familiar features under brown-and-silver hair, the circlet across his forehead in the shape of a snake consuming its own tail. Then, she hadn't known what terrible destruction Gar would wreck on the world. Seeing the Devourer now made her body go rigid with fear and anger.

Abeke sensed Meilin go still beside her. This was the first time she was seeing the man who had killed her father.

The Devourer wasn't more than a dozen yards off — even though Abeke had no doubt she would be dead soon after, she could easily have made a shot from this distance. She longed for her bow and arrow.

Drina spoke, and for some reason the moment she started speaking Shane's face went pale. "Uncle Gar, you should have Gerathon *force* them to put away their animals. I've fought Greencloaks, and I know what trickery they're capable of."

Gar chuckled grimly and slapped his fist. "You may have been defeated by a Greencloak, dear Drina. News of your embarrassment has not escaped me. But that does not mean that any of them could manage to hurt *me*."

Shane shot a concerned look at his sister, imploring her to stay quiet. Abeke studied their interaction, confused and fascinated. She thought Drina was right, actually — it was a mistake to allow them Uraza and Jhi. But all the same, Abeke knew that if she'd interrupted her father at a tribal council, she'd have heard no end of it. Gar had a similar sort of severity to him, and Drina had clearly spoken out of turn.

"You are correct, General," said Gerathon, her voice low and raspy. "It gives me pleasure to see how weak and pitiful Uraza and Jhi look in their new, tiny forms. If only Essix and Briggan could be on display here as well."

"Maybe you'd like Jhi and me to come closer," Meilin said defiantly. "So

you can see us better.” Her legs locked into a fighting stance.

“Oh, if you wish to be eaten, I can make that happen,” Gerathon rasped. “Do not fear.”

“If you don’t plan to fight us or kill us, there is no other point to this meeting!” Meilin shouted, fury in her eyes. “You will learn nothing from us.”

Gerathon disengaged from Gar and writhed, her coils thrashing in smaller and smaller rings. The Great Serpent’s dark eyes flashed yellow, and Meilin went slack. Her own pupils dilated. “Rollan,” the girl said numbly. “Let me protect you, Rollan.”

Abeke’s heart dropped in horror at the sight of her friend possessed. Without meaning to, she lifted a hand protectively to her throat.

Meilin’s eyes regained their usual luster. She looked like she was waking from a dream, groggy and confused. Then a look of dismay came over her face. “What just happened?” she whispered to Abeke.

“Nothing,” Abeke said resolutely.

“Oh, we will learn plenty from you!” Drina called out. “Your Great Beasts are nothing compared to ours.”

“Sister, be quiet,” Shane said pleadingly.

Meilin hung her head. Abeke suspected what her friend was thinking, and it made her sick: Part of Meilin wished the Conquerors *would* kill her.

“Many months ago, I told you the plight of Stetriol,” Gar said, cutting through the laughs and mutterings of the assembled Conquerors. “That the Greencloaks have ignored our continent and left its people to suffer in isolation. And I wasn’t lying to you. But we are through *asking* for assistance. A war is underway. Once, Zhong might have given us the most trouble, but we have been victorious there. The royal palace lies in cinders. Amaya and Nilo are falling, and Eura will be ours soon after. It is inevitable which way this war will go, and once it does, Kovo the Ape will be released. Then, with the united talismans, the new age of order for Erdas can begin.”

At the mention of Kovo, Meilin perked up.

“History will have only one right side,” Gar finished. “You can join us, or you can die!” The Devourer raised his hand triumphantly, and the assembled Conquerors roared.

“Never!” Meilin screamed, tears of frustration and anger in her eyes. “The only fate for the man who killed my father will be death at my hand!”

Abeke held silent, wishing that Meilin could hold back her rage. They would never join the Conquerors, but it might be wise to play along, if it meant staying alive.

Gar chuckled grimly. “I might have expected as much. You probably think of this little show of yours as an act of courage. But I see only foolishness. The tides have turned, and yet you insist on swimming against them. You know what happens to people who swim against tides for too long, don’t you? They drown.”

He made a great show of laying his hand on the grip of his greatsword. “I will give you one day to change your mind. After that time —”

“I will do as I will,” Gerathon finished. She opened her wide jaws and extended her hollow fangs from the pink flesh of her mouth. A muscle in her throat flexed, and a drop of poison emerged from each, shining green-yellow in the sunlight.

At the sight of Gerathon’s fangs, Abeke experienced a fear stronger than any she’d felt before. It was fear without exit, fear without hope. A pall descended on the courtyard. Even in her panic, Abeke noted it to herself: *The Conquerors are scared of Gerathon, too.*

Slowly, Gerathon retracted her fangs and closed her mouth. A drop of venom was still hanging from her lower jaw; her long forked tongue emerged and flicked it away.

It landed right on Drina’s foot.

The girl shook her boot frantically, trying to get the noxious fluid off. Once she had, her lips curled back in disgust. “So foul,” she muttered.

At the sound of her words, the assembled Conquerors went silent. Drina seemed to realize her breach, and put a hand over her mouth.

“Drina,” Gar said, breaking the bleak spell holding the audience still. “Step forward.”

“What?” Drina said, her voice quavering. She shot a worried look to her brother. He clenched his jaw, eyes wide. He was powerless to help her.

“Step forward,” Gerathon hissed, circling her huge body around Drina’s ankles, the scales cutting her flesh as Drina struggled to keep her feet. “Do as

your lord requests.”

Drina staggered toward Gar. The spider on her shoulder skittered around her neck to the other side and back again, agitated. “I’m sorry, General Gar, if I have offended —”

“Now,” he intoned. “Come to me.”

Abeke watched in dread and confusion as Drina, head hung low, stepped toward Gar. “Hold out your hand,” he ordered.

Drina did as she was told, palm up. Her fingers trembled.

“You were tasked with recovering the talismans the Greencloaks have accumulated in Greenhaven. You have failed.”

Drina stood motionless and wordless, terror on her face. “Uncle, please!” she cried out. “Their defenses were too strong.”

Gerathon’s eyes went yellow again, and the spider on Drina’s shoulder — her spirit animal — reared back, raising its front legs. Enthralled by the Great Beast, it rocked from side to side, as if it were in an invisible current. Then, it skittered down Drina’s body, walking out over her shaking, outstretched arm, until it was at the pale exposed wrist. It paused again, forelegs in the air. In striking position.

“There is only one punishment for failure, niece,” Gar said, his voice soft with resignation. “Even for you.”

The spider peered at Gerathon with its many eyes, rocking back and forth in its mind-controlled trance.

Almost imperceptibly, the grinning cobra nodded.

When the spider lifted its fangs, Drina’s eyes narrowed. Abeke could sense her trying to control her spirit animal.

But the giant arachnid was under Gerathon’s control now. Drina must have drunk the Bile, just like all the other Conquerors. Drina gave up on controlling the animal, and instead flailed her arm, trying to get the spider off. It clung on tight, all its legs circling her wrist.

With surprising speed, Yumaris stepped forward. She grabbed the girl’s hand and wrenched it cruelly, forcing the arm still. “Now!” Yumaris hissed. “Finish her now!”

“Please, Gerathon —” Shane began to say.

But his words were lost as, silently and cleanly, the spider sank its fangs into Drina's wrist.

Drina bled like she'd been stabbed; the spider's fangs were that large. She gasped at the pain, and her knees buckled. Almost immediately, her eyes fluttered and rolled back. Then she collapsed, quivering, on the ground. Within seconds, she was still.

The assembled Conquerors were queasily silent for a moment.

Then Yumaris raised a cheer, her old voice quavering but loud. "All hail the Reptile King!"

The crowd yelled out, stomping their feet. "All hail the Reptile King!"

Abeke could see fear on many of the Conquerors' faces. None of them wanted to be the next victim of Gerathon's rage. It was then that she realized the truth: This awful display had been as much for the assembled troops as it had been for her and Meilin. Every one of the Conquerors, from their soldiers to their leaders, were prisoners in this war.

They were all Gerathon's puppets.

The only one not joining in the cheering was Shane. He remained silent, his face slack. He took a step toward his sister's slumped corpse, when Gerathon snapped her head toward him, hissing warningly.

"Do not make us suspect that brother is like sister, Shane," she said, barely audible over the crowd's roar. "This is the time for you to prove your loyalty."

"Yes," Shane said, so quietly Abeke could only barely hear him. "You are right."

Shane's head rose, and Abeke was shocked to see him look right past Gerathon — at *her*. Within the tumult of the cheering Conquerors, the creaks of their armor, and the clanging of their weapons, Abeke saw Shane's lips move. It took her a moment to understand what he was saying.

"Six, five, four ..." He was counting down!

Nothing got past wise old Yumaris, though. Her eyes widened when she saw Shane's lips. "Beware!" she cried, shaking her gnarled staff at him.

The boy sprang into motion, lunging toward Gar. With surprising agility Yumaris stepped into his way, and the two tumbled, rolling into the Reptile King. Gar barely budged at the impact, but the elderly Conqueror didn't get up. Shane

was soon on his feet before a stunned Gar, unsheathing his saber and taking a fighting stance. Shane didn't attack his uncle, though: Instead, he sprinted toward Abeke and Meilin.

Uraza darted in front, as if to fight him, but Abeke cried out for her to fall back. The leopard faltered, confused, frozen with one paw in the air, peering at Abeke with her violet eyes. Shane surged past her, tossing his saber to Meilin. She caught it handily.

"They killed my sister," Shane said, his features contorted in rage. "They made her —"

"We saw!" Abeke cried as she crouched, fists out. There was no time to think. The Conquerors were recovering from their surprise and surging forward. If Abeke and Meilin had any hope of escape, they had to act *now*. "Where do we go?"

Shane pointed to one spot in the courtyard. It was swarming with Conquerors, but Abeke would have to trust his judgment that they could somehow escape that way. They dashed across the sandstone flagstones, Jhi taking up a defensive position on one side, Uraza on the other. Meilin whipped the saber through the air while she ran, testing its weight. She was preparing for battle.

Gerathon opened her mouth wide, fangs as long as lances. With muscular side-to-side motions, she arrowed across the courtyard to cut them off. The serpent was horrifyingly fast — she'd be on them in a moment. "Shane ... !" Abeke warned.

"I know!" he barked.

As soon as they reached the Conquerors at the edge, Abeke realized why Shane had chosen this spot. There were five enemies at one portal, but two lowered their weapons in confusion when they approached — they must have been Shane's friends.

The other three were not.

They fell into defensive positions, crouched with swords raised.

Uraza was on them first. She'd built up a fierce sprint across the courtyard, and hit the nearest Conqueror like a spear, striking his chest and pinning him to the ground. Immediately, she wheeled to face the next. Meilin already had her,

though, dropping to her hands for a kick to the Conqueror's knee. She then grabbed the Conqueror's own sword and came up sharp with the hilt, knocking the woman out cold. That left only one blocking their escape route. Again Abeke longed for her bow. But she didn't have it. Without martial arts training like Meilin's, she struggled to figure out how to best contribute to the fight. When the last Conqueror brought her sword blade slicing toward her, Abeke was rooted to the ground.

Shane had it under control. Using his shoulder as a battering ram, he came in sideways, slamming the Conqueror in the gut and rolling to the ground with her. Within a moment the Conqueror was unconscious on the ground and Shane was back on his feet, motioning them forward.

Aware of Gerathon's giant black shape bearing down, Abeke stuck close to Shane's side. Meilin, though, had whirled to face the crowd descending on them, Shane's saber brandished in one hand and the Conqueror's sword in the other.

"Meilin, what are you doing?" Abeke cried. But then she saw where Meilin's attention was focused: Gar. The general of the Conquerors, the man who had killed Meilin's father, was marching toward them. Her face furious, Meilin crouched in a fighting stance, her blades held out parallel to the ground.

Jhi stood on her two feet between Meilin and Abeke, looking between the pair of them. Gerathon was nearly in striking distance, and the panda slowly turned to face her. It would be hopeless to try to fight the giant serpent and the Devourer — Meilin had to realize she was putting not only herself, but the rest of them in danger.

"Now isn't the time!" Shane shouted. "If you want to escape, you have to come with me!"

"For Jhi's sake, Meilin!" Abeke cried.

Meilin turned, saw Jhi right in Gerathon's path, and lowered her weapons. Jhi joined her as she ran toward Abeke and Shane, bringing her blades up just in time to parry a Conqueror's mace. She grunted under the impact and fell to the stone floor, then rolled and was back on her feet in an instant.

Shane led the charge through the archway. It gave out into a ditch skirting the exterior wall of the manor house. Uraza followed after, the others racing behind.

“The boat that took you from Okaihee,” Shane panted as they ran. “It’s my family’s ship. It’s moored in the harbor, on the far side of this town. If we’re the first to get there ...”

“Got it,” Abeke said, breaking into a full sprint.

They passed along the manor’s wall, past what looked like the Conquerors’ armory, until a large Niloan port town came into view, an assortment of blocky baked-mud buildings leading down to docks. The Conquerors must have all been assembled at the manor courtyard, and they’d managed to break ahead of them — the way forward appeared to be free of enemies. Shane knew just the turns to take through the winding streets, and the tumult behind them began to sound farther and farther away. They raced past shuttered shops, empty dining tents, and unattended training rooms.

Abeke heard seagulls, and realized they must be nearing the dock. Shane began to slow, and led them through an unmarked door into a dank building. He shut the door behind him, then began sifting through stacks of damp, sea-rotted crates piled against a wall. “Before the Conquerors took over this town, this building used to be the customs house,” he explained. “I wasn’t expecting a voyage, so there won’t be any fresh food for our trip. But there’s enough to eat and drink in these old shipments, if you don’t mind hardtack and *lots* of fermented Niloan cherry. Grab a box, each of you, and we’ll head straight for the ship.”

While Uraza paced, Abeke took the largest crate she could handle. She followed Shane through the cavernous, musty hall, and only realized Meilin wasn’t with her when she reached the far door. She turned and saw Meilin with Jhi, sitting motionless by the crates, head bowed and hands clasped. “What is it?” Abeke said impatiently. “We have to leave *now*, Meilin.”

Meilin looked at her, tears in her eyes. “I’m not coming.”

“You have to be kidding me,” Shane said. “They’ll kill you for trying to escape, you know that, right?”

“Gerathon can use me any time she wants. She can make me kill myself, like she forced Drina’s spider to kill her. Or she could make me kill Abeke. I can’t come with you. It’s not safe.”

“I don’t care!” Abeke said. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Think reasonably,” Meilin said. “This is for the best. You have no chance if I’m with you. Gerathon will use me to find out where you are. Or worse. Admit it.”

Jhi took a step toward Abeke and Shane, looked forlornly at Meilin, then stepped forward again. It was clear she was torn on the matter.

“She has a point, Abeke,” Shane said quietly. “Meilin is compromised. You and I never drank the Bile. Our bonds came naturally.”

“Meilin, you want to stay here to get revenge on Gar!” Abeke said. “You admit *that*.”

“Of course that’s part of it,” Meilin said. Tears fell from her eyes as she stared down at the saber in her hands. “But mainly I don’t want to hurt you again. Help me stop myself from hurting you. Please.”

Abeke’s jaw trembled, and she had to clench her muscles to keep the shaking from passing to her whole body. In her heart, Abeke knew Meilin was right. In the Conqueror base, Gerathon had no use for Meilin as a spy or a murderer. The moment Meilin escaped, though, Gerathon would possess her. Abeke reluctantly nodded. “We’ll come back for you,” she said. “I promise.”

Meilin walked over and hugged Abeke. “I’m sorry,” she whispered hoarsely. “For everything. You were a better friend than I deserved.”

Abeke’s eyes stung. She closed them tight, and clasped Meilin to her.

“I’m sorry too, Meilin,” Shane said from behind them. Abeke turned, taking the boy in. He rubbed his shoulders. There was a new softness to him that was surprising in someone so tall and strong. “If I’d only seen my uncle for what he was earlier ... maybe your father, or Drina ...” His voice broke. Shane sighed, shaking his head. “Thank you for this sacrifice. I’ll do my best to live up to it. I’ll protect Abeke, and we *will* find a way to stop my uncle.”

Meilin watched him silently for a moment, measuring him. Then she gave a single affirming nod, apparently satisfied with what she saw.

Shane worriedly scanned the dockside quays. “I hear footsteps approaching. We need to get going.”

“Enough talk, then,” Meilin said, wiping her eyes. Beside her, Jhi leaned her head against Meilin’s hip. “Get going!”

Shane creaked open the dockside door. At the other side was the town’s

small port — it was almost vacant, filled with the noise of creaking boats and flooded by morning light. Abeke hefted a crate and followed Shane out onto the docks. Uraza paced beside her, body slung low, ears flat and violet eyes alert.

“If we somehow make it to Greenhaven, will the Greencloaks kill me the moment I appear?” Shane asked.

“You saved my life,” Abeke said. “I’ll make sure they don’t hurt you.”

“Thank you,” Shane said, relief in his voice.

As they hurried along the harbor, Abeke’s thoughts were not on Shane, but on Meilin. How long would it be before they saw each other again? Could they find a way to cure Meilin of her Bile poisoning?

Meilin must be feeling so lonely and wretched, so scared at the prospect of surviving alone amid the Conquerors. Abeke wished she could hug her friend one more time. As she tossed her crate to the deck of Shane’s boat and prepared to leap aboard herself, Abeke glanced back at the customs house.

Meilin was almost out of view. It was only because of Abeke’s link with Uraza that her senses were keen enough to spy her. Meilin was slumped inside the customs house, half-hidden in a dark corner. She leaned forward and waved, the glint of her eyes only just visible in the dimness. Abeke could barely make out Jhi’s black paw beside her.

Abeke waved back, then jumped to the deck of the ship, Uraza leaping after her and landing softly on the sun-warmed wood. Abeke found she was short of breath, but not from the run. A terrible certainty gripped at her chest, choking out the crisp ocean air.

She was never going to see her friend again.



THE OASIS

CONOR STARED FROM HIS HIDING PLACE IN THE SAW grass as the Conquerors tried to force their way through the ostrich canyon. Irtike had buried her head in the thick yellow blades, unwilling to watch the bloodbath. But Conor, Rollan, Tarik — and Lumeo and Snake Eyes — were watching closely.

The raiders they'd seen before must have been a less organized advance force. This army was marching in unison, cavalry trotting in front and infantry nested behind, followed closely by archers. In the rear were camels lugging supplies, tended by captured Niloans, their heads bowed in misery. The Conquerors' dark leathers squeaked and creaked as they approached the pass. The ostriches had bravely lined up at the southern end, just like before, but their force looked pathetic compared to the hundreds of Conquerors surging along.

"Zerif," Tarik said, pointing at the tall Conqueror heading up the infantry. Conor squinted and saw that, indeed, it was the handsome man with the close-cropped beard, the one who had stolen Meilin and Abeke away. "They're sending one of their most important leaders," Tarik said. "Clearly the Golden Lion is crucial to their plans."

"There's no way that line of ostriches can hold against them," Conor said. "All we can do is hope that Briggan and Essix have already managed to get the talisman before the Conquerors reach the oasis."

Rollan peered miserably at him. Conor felt his brow dotting with nervous sweat.

“That’s what I was trying to tell you,” Rollan said. “I don’t think Briggan and Essix are going to get the Golden Lion. They were in serious trouble when you pulled me away. I need to go back into Essix’s mind.”

“Trouble?” Conor said, his stomach going tight. “What trouble?”

Tarik frowned. “We’ll have to risk sending you back. Go on, Rollan. We’ll figure out what to do here.”

Immediately, Rollan closed his eyes. Conor watched as his body went limp, and his eyes began to move rapidly beneath the lids. The boy made little gasps. They’d have to wait for him to return with something concrete to report. For good or for bad.

In the meantime, Conor turned his attention back to the Conquerors in the pass.

The first horsemen reached the line of ostriches. Like the last group of Conquerors, they marched forward resolutely, and like the last group of Conquerors, they were felled as soon as they reached the birds. The ostriches’ powerful feet smashed in their helmets with amazing accuracy. The riders hit the canyon wall and didn’t get back up. Their horses scattered, some forward through the ostriches and others back into the infantry’s ranks.

It was no accident, Conor decided, that Zerif was leading a deeper line — he was more than willing to let his soldiers take the first hit. When the first group crumpled and the ostriches were preparing to attack again, Zerif shouted a command.

The lines of soldiers stopped, the archers readied their bows, and they released a volley.

The ostriches whirled in confusion, then began to fall. It was all over in seconds: The surviving ostriches scattered, and the Conquerors poured through the pass. Zerif galloped forward to take the head. He shouted triumphantly as he led his army toward Cabaro’s oasis.

Conor wanted to run down and attack, but he and his friends had no chance against such a large force, especially without Briggan and Essix. Being reminded of Briggan’s absence made Conor want to bury his head in his arm — it was like

he was missing a piece of himself. But instead he held his head high. His companions needed him. Briggan needed him.

It took at least half an hour for the Conqueror army to pass through the narrow bottleneck. They strode right into the desert, kicking up a cloud of yellow dust that plumed high into the sky.

As the last Conquerors passed into the desert, Irtike pressed her ear to the ground, gripping Snake Eyes tightly to her chest.

“What is it?” Conor asked. The slender girl made a silencing gesture.

Finally she spoke. “The men the ostriches killed. Their horses scattered, but they’ve calmed now and are gathering on the other side of the cliff, just out of view. I can sense the vibrations of their hooves.”

Conor looked at Tarik, sudden hope wetting his eyes. “If we go on horseback, and there’s only four of us, maybe we can outpace them.”

Tarik was already on his feet. “Let’s move.”

Conor looked at Rollan, laid out flat on the grass, lips moving as he followed Essix in his mind. “What about Rollan?” he asked. “We can’t leave him behind.”

“Of course not,” Tarik said. And with that, he hefted Rollan and carried him down the bluff, holding the boy gently in his arms, like a sick child. Conor and Irtike rushed to stuff their belongings into their packs and then followed Tarik down.

They caught up just as he reached the horses, which were precisely where Irtike had said they’d be, chewing at a stand of dried grass at the desert’s edge. Conor looked at their small companion with new appreciation.

Tarik laid Rollan on his belly across the back of the horse with the gentlest-looking face, then fastened the saddle straps over the boy’s back. Conor picked a steed and fitted his pack to the saddle. Irtike removed the saddle from hers and nimbly clambered on.

They trotted at first, until they saw that none of the mass of Conquerors ahead of them was dropping back to investigate. Once they knew they were relatively safe, they began to gallop. Tarik steered them at a wide angle so they could go around the enemy army.

As they turned, Rollan’s body began to slide from the saddle, until his head was hanging over the side of the horse. Worried for his friend’s safety, Conor

nearly called for a stop. But then he saw Rollan groggily shake his head and yelp in surprise as he opened his eyes to sand streaming past.

“Welcome back!” Conor yelled over the wind, grinning at Rollan.

Grumbling loudly, Rollan edged himself back up his horse, and managed to unstrap himself even while riding forward. Finally he was right-side up, galloping alongside them. “I’ve never particularly liked horses!” he called.

His nag whinnied in response.

“I’m not sure they like you either,” Conor retorted.

“Let me tell you what I’ve found out about Briggan and Essix,” Rollan yelled. Tarik and Irtike fell into line, the better to hear while they rode.

“Briggan’s alive,” Rollan said. “He faced Cabaro, but the lion was too lazy to fight. He sent his lionesses after him. Briggan might have managed it, except a group of wild dogs attacked him from behind. Not even Briggan’s command over canines could shake Cabaro’s hold on them.”

“No!” Conor cried. “Is he okay?”

Rollan nodded grimly. “Just. Essix picked off enough of the dogs that Briggan stayed on his feet. But he had to retreat. He’s hidden somewhere in the oasis. Essix rose into the air when he fled. She can’t see him anymore.”

“And the Golden Lion?” Tarik yelled.

Rollan took a moment to rebalance himself as they surged forward, pressing the balls of his feet hard into his stirrups. “Cabaro’s still got it.”

“For now,” Irtike said. “I’m sure he has no idea that a Conqueror army is about to descend on his precious animal oasis.”

Rollan closed his eyes for a moment, then whipped them open and visored his eyes against the sun hanging in the southern sky. “Essix is on her way toward us.”

“Tell her to stay there!” Conor begged. “Ask her if she can spy any sign of Briggan.”

“I can’t communicate with her like that,” Rollan said. “But I think something’s wrong.” He clenched the reins in his hand and closed his eyes. His brow furrowed. “Wait!” His eyes snapped open again, wild with fear. “There are more Conquerors coming through the pass behind us! A hundred or so.”

Fear tingled along Conor’s spine. His horse seemed to sense his anxiety, and

swerved off course. Conor had to pull hard on the reins to get it back in formation.

Conor whirled in his saddle. Behind them, he could see a mass at the northern horizon, ringed in rising dust. An undulating, jet-black figure slithered at the head. It looked small now, but was quickly getting larger. It was a snake, and there was only one giant snake that he knew of.

Gerathon.

Conor faced forward, toward the other contingent of Conquerors.

“We’re trapped,” Tarik said, voicing Conor’s thoughts. “They have us in a vise.”

“Head for the oasis!” Conor said. “Out here we’re easy targets. We have to find some cover.”

“And then all we have to do is beat away a few dozen wild dogs and lions!” Rollan called. “Make sure you keep the Slate Elephant against your skin, Conor. Without his extra size, Briggan would already have fallen.”

It seemed to Conor that the wild dogs and lionesses were the least of their difficulties when they had Gerathon to contend with. And Zerif. Not to mention a few hundred Conqueror soldiers.

Essix plummeted beak-first, extending her wings just in time to slow and land on Rollan’s shoulder. Rollan barely seemed to notice as he peered forward. “There’s a stand of trees shaking in the oasis, toward the left side. That’s probably where Briggan is. If we ride all out, we should get there before the first Conquerors do.”

They didn’t need to voice their agreement. Tarik directed his horse slightly to the side, and before long the oasis was in plain view. Conor’s heart leaped when he saw a large gray form whirling at the eastern edge. Several small brown shapes corralled Briggan, so that he was half in the desert and half out of it.

They sped toward the harried wolf, Conor brandishing his hand ax and preparing to attack. But as they got closer he saw that the wild dogs weren’t venturing past the tree line. Briggan faced the pack from the sand, but they held tight at the edge of the oasis, whining and nipping the air.

Briggan spotted Conor as they neared. His tail began to wag, and Conor laughed joyfully in response. But then he saw the severity of Briggan’s wounds.

Because of his thick fur, it was impossible to see the individual gashes, but Briggan's coat was matted and red in more places than it wasn't.

"I wish we had Jhi here," Conor said as they dismounted beside Briggan. Instantly the giant wolf was nuzzling him, pressing his wet nose into the boy's side, almost knocking him over. Heedless of the blood, Conor ran his hands through Briggan's fur. He tried to keep his voice calm, for Briggan's sake. "You need healing." Unable to hold back anymore, Conor threw his hands around Briggan's leg. "Oh, I've missed you!"

Now that the others were here, the dogs retreated into the oasis, growling and snapping. Briggan slumped to the ground while Tarik investigated his wounds. "Surface, mostly," he said. "I think he's going to be okay. But he's exhausted past his limits, and won't be recovering anytime soon."

Conor pressed his face against the wolf's snout. "You hear that? You need to rest some."

"Well, I wish we could offer him some bedtime," Rollan said, staring at the dust cloud kicked up by the Conqueror army as it poured into the oasis a quarter mile away. "But time is what we don't have. Either we convince Cabaro to give us the Golden Lion, or we surrender it to the Conquerors."

Irtike pointed to the trail of fallen trees that Briggan had created while he'd been chased by the wild dogs. "That's the way the dogs retreated," she said. "I think we can assume there's where we'll find Cabaro. I'm picking up heavy vibrations from the center."

Conor nodded. "Let's go."

Briggan led the way, limping gingerly through the trail of broken trees. Still magnified by the Slate Elephant, he stepped over even the largest fallen trunks. The others had a harder time of it. They left their horses at the edge and proceeded on foot, as there was no way their mounts could pass through the dense jungle.

At one point Briggan had to lift them over a tree one by one, tenderly biting into the scruffs of their shirts and carrying them over like pups. The sight of big Tarik helpless in Briggan's jaws would stick with Conor for a long time. Even in the desperation of their situation, it was hard not to laugh.

Conor began to smell something he hadn't since the hut in Okaihee, and at

first he couldn't place it. Then he realized — it was the same scent as the lone lion they'd encountered. Conor opened to his mouth to warn his companions, but there was no need.

Briggan was already over the last tree — they'd come to the lagoon at the center of the oasis. The still blue surface reflected the few wispy clouds that were in the sky. The four lionesses were near, two licking the wounds of their companions. They must have been exhausted by the combat. Though their heads snapped to attention when the group arrived, they didn't get to their feet.

Why did they need to, though, when Cabaro the Lion was there, rested and whole, lounging at the far side of the lagoon? When he saw the team he got to his feet slowly, stretching his head low to the ground with front legs outflung, never taking his eyes off them. He strolled around the lagoon's edge, then sauntered over to his lionesses. Those huge cats seemed like kittens compared to him. Cabaro had to be at least a dozen feet long, and moved with easy grace and obvious strength.

"Greencloaks," he said in his velvety voice. "My least favorite of all humans. I don't know how you got past my ostriches, but you should have taken the hint that humans aren't welcome here. You'd best leave, before I get really angry."

Conor wanted to speak, to find a way to convince Cabaro that he should help them protect the Golden Lion from the Conquerors. But when he opened his mouth, fear of the immense beast made his throat close tight.

Luckily Rollan was more unflappable. He stepped forward, bravely brandishing his long dagger, however pathetic it looked compared to the teeth of Cabaro.

"Yeah, well," he said, standing tall. "You might want to ... shut up."

When Essix cried out irritably from a palm directly above him, Rollan shrugged up at her. "Cut me some slack, Essix. It's been a long day."

Cabaro rolled his golden eyes. "The Essix I knew was a Great Beast, not a squawking bird who does the bidding of humans. Are you sure this Essix isn't actually a parrot?"

Essix shrieked in outrage.

"Cabaro," Tarik said, standing forward with one palm open, the other

guiding Rollan's dagger tip toward the ground. "My name is Tarik. We have come to warn you that the Conquerors are at the edge of your oasis, and heading inward as we speak. They will be here any minute. I won't hide the truth, that we believe your talisman will be safest in the care of the Greencloaks — but right now we have great need of your might. As we speak, precious seconds are slipping by. The Devourer is here, and Gerathon. Please, let us help you. Let us all flee, and speak later at our leisure."

Cabaro had been listening with evident amusement, but when Tarik said Gerathon's name, a fraction of fear entered the lion's eyes. He seemed about to answer when Briggan stepped forward. The wolf kept his head low, not in submission, but in a peculiar deference. A long look passed between the two Great Beasts. Conor could only imagine what the two legends might be telling each other with that gaze.

Newly agitated, Cabaro began licking his talisman. He dangled the massive pendant from his paw as he spoke. "I can handle myself in combat — no creature that has ever lived has bested me, not even Gerathon. If she dares attack, I will pounce behind her triangular head like a mongoose, and shake until she can move no more. That will be my reply to her."

Conor's heart swelled, in spite of himself. He would love to see that.

"But," Cabaro continued, "you are telling me nothing I don't already know. My animals rove all over Nilo and beyond, bringing me news of the other continents. I knew the moment the Devourer had returned, and when Gerathon was freed, a claim I doubt you Greencloaks can make. *And* I knew they would come for my talisman. They will need it to free Kovo, whose prison was stronger. I was well aware that my precious solitude would one day come to an end."

Cabaro paced around the edge of the lagoon. Occasionally he would flash something almost like a smile at the companions — he was clearly enjoying the attention, the drama. "But I will never do what you ask, precisely because it is *you* who ask it. Perhaps I would have listened to Briggan and Essix, had they come on their own. But once I learned they were linked to humans — that in their rebirth they had become mere tools for your kind — the Four Fallen lost my support. If animals banded together and prevented humans from interfering

with us, destroyed Conquerors and Greencloaks alike, destroyed every would-be Reptile King, then there would be hope for their world. But we allow humans to run rampant. Why should we be surprised when their desires turn corrupt? The world's fate was sealed as soon as humans came to dominate it. Ours has been a slow slide into servitude.”

Briggan began to growl softly, while Essix struck a defiant stance, sharp beak high. Conor wondered what they were really thinking, but their conclusion was clear: They still stood on the side of the Greencloaks.

Conor managed to find his voice. “Like Suka,” he said. “You’ve given up on the world, just like Suka the Polar Bear did.”

Cabaro laughed, a strangely raspy sound. “No. Nothing mattered to Suka but extending her own lifespan. I think her brain must have been damaged from the prolonged cold. I also saw the end of our time coming, but choose instead to *live* my remaining days — to spend them in comfort and fellowship.”

Rollan frowned. “Conor, is this what I sounded like that day Olvan asked us to become Greencloaks? If so, I give you permission to punch me. Once. In the shoulder.”

Cabaro slinked around the lagoon, his body lazy and relaxed. But there was a flash in his eyes that made Conor uneasy. Then he realized: The lion was edging toward them.

“Watch out —!” Conor started to warn.

Cabaro sprang. The cat was high in the air, and came down with claws outstretched, right onto Briggan’s back. The lion’s teeth sank deep into the wolf’s neck and clamped tight. As soon as the massive Great Beast impacted him, Briggan was prone on the ground, pressed beneath Cabaro’s weight. His breath came only in strangled gasps.

Rollan leaped toward the giant lion, dagger outstretched. Cabaro was so big, and had pounced so far up on the back of Briggan, that the best the boy could manage was to reach his paw. Rollan’s dagger sank into one of Cabaro’s foot pads. Cabaro glanced only momentarily at the annoyance, never lessening his clamp on Briggan’s throat. With a roar that seemed to shake the very ground beneath their feet, the lion clenched harder.

Briggan’s eyes bulged wide, his mouth agape. The wolf wasn’t even able to

gasp anymore. “He’s crushing his windpipe!” Conor cried, running forward, swinging his hand ax wildly.

“Watch for the lionesses!” Irtike shouted. The cats were circling around, maneuvering themselves behind the group. Tarik whirled on them, his curved sword outstretched. When he whipped it through the air, the lionesses paused.

Mindless with fury, Conor grabbed handfuls of Briggan’s fur and climbed up his side. Hand by hand, he reached for Cabaro’s pelt. The lion twisted beneath Conor’s fingers, the muscles thick, hot cords within the cat’s body. Once he’d reached Cabaro’s ribs, Conor reared his ax back and sank it as deep as he could into the cat’s back.

Though Conor’s aim was true, the blade made only a superficial wound on the giant beast. Still, the great cat howled in pain. Cabaro released his stranglehold on Briggan and leaped from the wolf, his claws raking Briggan’s flesh as he launched. Cabaro twisted in the air and landed in the midst of his lionesses. Conor was rocketed off, tumbling through the air.

Cabaro roared, powerful and deafening. The lazy, smiling cat was gone. This was a savage opponent, the strongest they’d yet seen, made even more fearsome by his swirling lionesses, snapping and snarling.

“At my side!” Tarik called, waving his companions to him. “Back to back!”

Irtike was already there, and Rollan joined her, shoulder to shoulder. Conor wouldn’t leave Briggan’s side, though. The Great Wolf was breathing but seemed stunned — he tried to get to his feet and failed. “It’s okay,” Conor whispered, stroking Briggan’s paw. “You’re going to be okay.”

Tarik brought Irtike and Rollan over to Conor, and together they took positions around Briggan, weapons at the ready to protect their friend. Essix hovered above, talons out, wings whipping up dust.

Cabaro and his lionesses circled them, lunging and feinting, long teeth gleaming. Each time a lioness came close, Tarik or Rollan lashed out with his weapon. Conor would have joined them, but his ax was gone, lost in the tumult. For the moment, their mock attacks seemed to be keeping the lions at bay — just. But Conor started hearing something that alarmed him: Wild dogs were yipping at their backs.

“Dogs too? This is impossible!” Rollan said, just loudly enough for his

companions to hear. “We don’t stand a chance!”

“Retreating is not an option,” Tarik said. “None of us could outrun any of the lionesses.”

His companions covering him, Conor inspected the deep gashes on Briggan’s neck. Tears of worry and anger dotted his eyes. “Briggan’s hurt badly.”

Conor’s vision swam as he looked at his hands. They were soaked in bright red blood. Briggan’s blood.

“He must go into his dormant form,” Tarik ordered. “Now. Before he bleeds out here.”

Conor nodded. He focused his energy and stared deep in to Briggan’s panicked eyes, begging him to go. Then, with a familiar searing snap, Briggan was gone, back to a tattoo on Conor’s arm.

One of the lionesses whirled, looked at the jungle’s edge, and gave a startled cry. Irtike followed her gaze and, Snake Eyes in hand, closed her eyes.

“Gentlemen,” Irtike said softly, her focus in the trees, “our situation is about to get much worse.”



THE PLAN

MEILIN WAS SURROUNDED BY DEPRESSED RATS.

She didn't know how many hours she'd sat motionless in the corner of the dank abandoned customs house, hidden away against a wall of slimy rotten wood, the rats skittering near. Once they'd gotten close to Meilin and Jhi, though, each one seemed to give up on moving, and lay flat on the floor. Meilin knew this was probably Jhi protecting her by pacifying them, but it seemed as if the rats felt the sadness coming from the girl, and were struck motionless by the weight of it.

On the other side of the thin walls, Meilin could hear running feet, urgent conversations, and the creaks and groans of ships being manned for sea. But no one had come inside and found her yet. She was still alive.

The customs house stayed silent. The floor was damp and smelled faintly of past cargoes, of oily fish and quicklime and spilled ale. There were lines of grime on the floor around the crates, and the sawdust on the ground was dotted with mold.

Jhi sat on the floor with her back to Meilin, who was picking absently through the panda's coarse hair, removing any bits of dirt she came across. Meilin wished she could do something to help Abeke — but only the speed of their ship would determine Abeke and Shane's fate now. There was nothing

Meilin could do about that.

But it wasn't truly Abeke who Meilin was thinking about now. Meilin had seen plenty of people fall in recent months, but strangely, Drina's death tormented her most of all.

First was the terrible swiftness of it. Drina had gone from living to dead in the space of seconds. Meilin also found it hard not to replay the moment of the bite over and over — those fangs had sliced the thin skin of Drina's wrist like a knife. The girl might have died from the blood loss even if the poison hadn't been so lethal.

As if sensing Meilin's dark thoughts, Jhi swung her head around and caught her gaze. The panda's silver eyes drooped at the corners. Meilin avoided Jhi's melancholy stare.

Because what struck her most was the fact that Drina had been killed by her own spirit animal. Meilin had no idea what went on in a spider's mind, but the animal had been bonded to Drina. Gerathon's influence had been enough to subvert the spirit animal bond — something deep and primal and sacred. If Gerathon could force a spirit animal against its owner, then the serpent could make someone who was poisoned by the Bile do anything.

Someone like Meilin.

Could Gerathon turn her against Jhi? She wouldn't know until she woke up from a dream and found out after the fact, discovered the panda wounded or dying by her side. Meilin realized with a start that it was only a matter of time before Gerathon used her mental link to track her down; that meant she had only a short time before she'd be caught.

She had to act now.

"Jhi," Meilin whispered. "We passed an armory when we were fleeing. We're going back there."

When Meilin got to her feet, the rats stood as well, shook their heads groggily, and limped away into nearby crates. Then Jhi got up to all fours. There was excitement in the panda's eyes — finally, they were fighting back.

Breath held, Meilin cracked open the door to the docks, then let it close again. She had no intention of getting herself captured the moment she walked out of the customs house. A trio of guards was right at the waterfront, staring out

to sea with a spyglass. Meilin figured it was a good sign if they needed a spyglass to see Abeke and Shane.

“Jhi, I need you to go dormant. You’re too big. You’ll attract attention.”

The panda looked at her placidly, her only motion one long blink.

“Jhi,” Meilin said warningly, “go dormant *this instant*.”

Jhi flicked one ear at her, and her head rocked to one side.

“Did you just *shake your head*? At the daughter of General Teng of Zhong?”

Jhi only stared.

“Fine!” Meilin said. She pressed her will around Jhi. The panda took on an even more mournful look, her essence squeezed tight, and then she disappeared into her tattoo.

“I’m sorry, Jhi,” Meilin said, shaking her head, keenly aware of the trespass she had just made. “It’s for the best.” Her father used to say those words to her, when work was going to take him away for weeks. Always with love. Meilin gritted her teeth.

She knew those soldiers would only keep their attention trained on the sea for so long — she had to move. Meilin opened the rickety door again, wincing when the corroded joints squeaked. The men still had their backs to her. She slipped along the side of the building, away from the docks.

Just like in the outposts of Zhong, the manor’s armory was within its walls, so guards could easily arm themselves while they defended their leaders. That meant Meilin would have to pass back up the alleys of the city’s derelict shops and houses and find a way through the portcullis gate. She took a deep breath, then stole forward.

She did as Rollan had once instructed her, following the technique he’d learned during his Amayan street rat days: run along a wall, slow at the corner, peer around, then run along the next wall. It was the split seconds between walls that were dangerous. Most thieves got nabbed in the open space between corners. As she sprinted and paused, sprinted and paused, Meilin imagined Rollan was with her, his pace matching hers. She might have received more formal training than he had, might have more breeding and etiquette, but right here, right now, he would have outclassed her. Meilin desperately wished he could be alongside her.

It wasn't hard to tell when a Conqueror was coming near — they moved heedlessly through their stronghold, heeled boots clomping. With plenty of advance warning, Meilin was able to make her way back to the manor wall without much difficulty. She hid in the shade of a stable and peered at the main entrance, debating what to do.

Everyone else must have been down at the port, readying ships to go after Abeke and Shane (and, they must have assumed, Meilin). Only one soldier remained at the entry, standing worriedly in the open space, his spear resting against a wall. He looked young to Meilin — a recent recruit, all nerves and insecurity.

He would do perfectly.

After making sure no one was nearby, Meilin summoned Jhi. When the panda appeared, she stared at Meilin balefully. "I'm sorry I forced you away," Meilin said curtly, "but you don't sneak well. You just don't. It's a fact."

While Jhi continued her accusing stare, Meilin pointed at the guard and whispered, "Can you calm him? Just so he doesn't attack me right away. Please do that for me."

Jhi looked at her with what Meilin thought was distrust, and it made her heart quake. Then the panda sighed and noiselessly padded out of the shadows. The guard saw her, opened his mouth to yell, then went strangely limp. His knees bent and his arms hung at his side, hands open, the sword clattering to the ground. He looked like a kid who had come across a fluffy bunny and melted at the cuteness of it.

Steadying her breath, Meilin stepped out of the shadows and joined Jhi.

At first the guard stayed relaxed. Then his face contorted and he picked up his sword, advancing on Meilin and Jhi. Meilin let him come, her hands at her sides.

She felt Jhi's eyes on her and knew the panda was relaxed; this soldier was nothing Meilin couldn't handle. But when the girl continued to hold still, Jhi's usually serene eyes flickered with fear. When the boy was almost within striking distance and Meilin hadn't yet crouched into a fighting stance, Jhi cast her gaze back to the Conqueror, probably working her hardest to calm him again.

The guard stepped closer, sword outstretched.

Meilin knew she had to fight him if she wanted to get to the armory. But suddenly, faced with this nervous boy not much older than herself, she couldn't bring herself to do it. How could she kill someone who was doing his duty? After her own betrayal, nothing was as clear as it once was, and without that clarity, her resolve wouldn't tighten into the will to fight.

The soldier raised his sword.

Jhi roared. Meilin startled. She'd never heard the sound from the panda before. Then Jhi was on her back legs, mouth open, teeth bared. The roar became louder, then Jhi slammed down on the soldier, swiping with her paw. Her claw caught him in the middle of his chest, and he sprawled back, skidding across the sandstone floor. He was out cold.

The panda got back to all fours, breathing heavily. Her breathing slowed, and she regained her usual composure.

"Jhi," Meilin said, staring at Jhi with her mouth wide open. "What just happened?"

She gave Meilin a long look, as if to say, *Well, you weren't going to do anything.*

Meilin looked at her companion with newfound wonder, then tilted her head. Footsteps approached — she was running out of time. Meilin ducked through the entranceway and into the shaded edges of the courtyard, Jhi tailing close beside her.

Pressed against the inside of the manor's wall was a narrow stone structure with an angled thatch roof. The iron-banded door was ajar, and through the portal Meilin could see a halberd. Its curved blade caught a glint of the midday sun.

She and Jhi skirted the wall and ducked inside, Jhi's wide backside only just managing to fit through. Meilin pressed the door nearly closed, leaving it ajar only enough so that a stray beam of sunlight illuminated the interior.

Jhi looked enormous in the narrow armory. The panda sat in the middle of the room and gazed around wonderingly, holding her forelimbs tight to her chest so they didn't knock over the racks of weapons. Meilin too scanned over the contents. The quality wasn't nearly as high as Zhongese weapons — even in the dim light she could see rust along the blades — but there was a broad range to

choose from. Some Niloan spears, probably seized from conquered villages, and plenty of weapons the Conquerors must have brought from Stetriol. Polearms lined one wall, crossbows another, and swords the last. Dangling above it all were the secondary tools of war: shields and caltrops, scabbards and sharpening stones. Jhi followed Meilin's eyes as they wandered around the armory, taking in all the options along with her companion.

Meilin paced the walls, fingertips trailing the shaft of a poleax, the trigger of a crossbow. Then she found something that would suit her purpose. Gracefully boosting herself atop a weapon rack, she reached high along the wall. The item she wanted was almost out of reach, and straining for it made a quiver clatter to the ground. Meilin flinched, going still, but a moment later she stretched again and just managed to snag it.

As Meilin pounced back to the floor, Jhi squinted at her. Then she saw what Meilin was holding and lumbered forward, growling again. Meilin wondered at the panda's new assertive side, but figured her own unusual behavior was probably bringing it out.

"Stop, Jhi," Meilin said softly. "I have to do this. You understand why."

Jhi hesitated, then took another step forward. "Jhi," Meilin said warningly, "don't try to block me."

Baffled and sad, Jhi reached out toward the heavy object in Meilin's hands and pawed at the air. Her growl began to sound more like a whine.

Meilin turned her back on Jhi and kneeled on the floor. She dropped the heavy metal device into her lap. Manacles.

Jhi tugged on Meilin's shoulder with her paw, trying to spin her around. But Meilin shrugged her off. She opened one of the manacles and placed her wrist inside, then closed it and turned the key. Jhi crying all the while, Meilin did the same to her other wrist.

She stared at her manacled wrists in her lap, almost too heavy to lift. These handcuffs were strong, and would be very difficult to remove. She dropped the key into a quiver, chosen at random. It tinkled against the wooden shafts as it fell to the bottom of the leather case. It would be nearly impossible to free her, even if Gerathon possessed her. Then, sighing heavily, Meilin slumped to the ground and closed her eyes.

No matter if Gerathon entered her mind now. There was no way to betray her companions here in the Conqueror base, and if she was in manacles, there was no way to use her against Jhi. Mind control didn't matter if the body was useless.

Meilin was still facing away from Jhi, but she could sense the panda behind her. "Now we just wait to be discovered."

She could hear Jhi's labored breathing. "I'm sorry," Meilin said, scrunching her eyes shut, her voice hitching. "I'm ... sorry."

The sound got closer. She could feel the panda's breath hot on the back of her neck.

"I'm ashamed, Jhi," Meilin whispered. "I'm so ashamed."

Jhi's body was warm. "I need you to go back to a tattoo," Meilin said. "So you can be safe."

But Jhi didn't budge. If Meilin wanted her to go dormant, she'd have to force her. "Even you don't trust me," Meilin said. "And I don't blame you. I've lost everyone and everything."

Suddenly there was something heavy, rough, and warm on Meilin's shoulders. It pressed, too strong to resist, and Meilin was on her back. She looked up through teary vision to see Jhi staring down at her. The giant panda's face wasn't usually expressive, but Meilin knew what was shining out of Jhi.

Love.

Meilin put her hands over her eyes, the manacle's chain heavy against her throat.

Jhi shifted so she too was laid out on the floor beside Meilin. There was barely room for the two of them, and as Jhi moved she sent a rack of knives clattering to the ground. Guards would be upon them soon.

But for right now, it was just the two of them. Some of the guilt binding Meilin's heart loosened. It wasn't that Jhi distrusted her. Jhi loved her, and didn't want her to be alone.

Meilin turned toward Jhi, clutched the panda's long coarse fur in her fists, and pressed her face into her belly. Jhi leaned over and gave Meilin's forehead small licks, over and over, like she was a panda cub that needed cleaning. At first Meilin hated the sensation of being so helpless, but soon found herself enjoying

it.

“Thank you, Jhi,” Meilin said softly, even as she heard booted footsteps approaching the armory door.

It struck her that she couldn’t have asked for a better spirit animal to get her through this guilt — a weight that she’d been carrying since the Hundred Isles. Since before that, maybe. Meilin never forgave anything — least of all herself.

Jhi forgave everything.

“I’m lucky, Jhi,” Meilin said as the door creaked open and the first Conquerors barged in. “I’m so lucky that you came to me.”

Jhi gave her a long lick down her cheek and snuggled in closer, putting her arms around Meilin protectively.

TARIK

“**W**AIT,” ROLLAN SAID. “YOU MEAN WE HAVE *MORE COMPANY*? Cabaro and four lionesses weren’t enough?”

“And wild dogs,” Conor said, looking around nervously. “I heard wild dogs too.”

“I can sense something very heavy,” Irtike said, eyes closed, “approaching through the jungle.”

Then Rollan heard the crashing sounds too. A distant treetop trembled and fell, then another. The next one to drop was even nearer. Cabaro and his lionesses heard it too, and froze in mid-step.

Cabaro whirled in a tight circle, his hackles raised to make him look even more enormous. Conor shuddered. Without Meilin or Abeke, and Briggan too wounded to fight, they were at the Great Lion’s mercy once he returned to the attack.

As more and more treetops fell, Cabaro whirled on them and snarled. “Are these more of your Greencloaks, come to help you? Your allies are destroying this fragile oasis. Hard to trumpet your goodness now, isn’t it?”

Tarik shook his head. “I warned you, Cabaro. Those are not Greencloaks. They are Conquerors, allies of the Devourer. And they are not here to talk reason.”

Rollan looked at the jeweled Golden Lion, secure around Cabaro's neck, then at the crashing treetops, heading ever nearer. Maybe Essix could try again to seize the talisman, but Rollan was loathe even to suggest it. One swipe from Cabaro's paw would be the end of the falcon.

They needed the talisman, but the very worst possibility was that the Conquerors would get it. The idea of Zerif holding the Golden Lion in triumph made Rollan furious. "Run!" he yelled to Cabaro. "Run and we'll delay the Conquerors. Save your talisman!"

"Run?" Cabaro said. "Do you not realize who I am? Cabaro runs from no enemy."

"Rollan speaks wisely," Tarik said. "For your own good and that of all of Erdas, please flee."

"Save your breath," Irtike murmured. "It's too late."

The greenery at the clearing's edge parted, and a giant black form barreled through, sidwinding into the clearing. It twisted and reared. Two scaled wings at either side of its head fanned out into a hood, and the snubbed permanent smile on the snake's face widened to show two fangs, long as swords.

Gerathon was here.

At the sight of the enormous cobra, Cabaro whirled, snarling. The lion was trapped — one way out was blocked by Gerathon, and the other by Rollan and his group. Remembering how aggressive the lone lion in Okaihee had become after it had been trapped, Rollan felt his body go numb with fear. Cabaro would have to attack them or Gerathon in order to escape, and Rollan knew which was the easier target.

Gerathon swayed, staring down each of them in turn and hissing. The Great Beast was so *long* — it was hard to imagine that she couldn't immediately strike anyone she wanted to hit. Behind her emerged a leather-armored figure. Zerif.

"Cabaro!" Tarik called. "Get behind us."

But anger flashed in Cabaro's eyes. He was taking orders from no one, especially not a human.

Rollan waited for Gerathon to speak, but Tarik had been right: She wasn't here to convince anyone of anything. The giant serpent reared and then, quick as an arrow, struck. The nearest lioness was trapped neatly between her fangs.

Gerathon hurled her to one side. She wouldn't have needed to use her poison — there was no way the lioness could have survived that blow. Then Gerathon struck again, and another lioness was punctured. She'd killed two full-grown lionesses in as many seconds.

Except for Cabaro, none of them could hope to match Gerathon for quickness. As she hurled the second lioness to one side, the giant lion roared and pounced, his jaw clamping right behind Gerathon's hood. The lion shook his head. Any smaller beast would have been flailing through the air, but Gerathon was too massive. She was motionless in the lion's mouth, her tail the only part of her that was thrashing.

The remaining lionesses pounced on that tail and sank their teeth in. The serpent thrashed, and everyone but Cabaro went flying. One of the lionesses struck a palm tree hard and lay still. Cabaro roared with the exertion, his eyes wide with fury, barely managing to hold on.

One eye on his wounded lionesses, Cabaro strained to stay locked onto the coiling and uncoiling snake. Then Gerathon went into a rapid twist, and Cabaro was thrown. Within an instant Gerathon's hood was high above him, and she struck.

Cabaro dodged quickly enough to prevent her fangs from sinking into his throat, but the cobra still managed to bite deeply into his rear thigh. The giant lion whirled and bit into Gerathon's hood, opening a deep gash in the scaly leather. Gerathon released him, and the moment Cabaro was free he leaped away — right between Rollan and Conor.

Panicked and snarling, Cabaro lunged at Conor first. The boy managed to roll away in the nick of time, bowling over Irtike and Snake Eyes in the process. The mole rat went flying, and Irtike scrambled after him on all fours. Then Cabaro streaked for the nearest way out of the clearing, swiping out viciously at the only thing in his path.

Rollan.

The world seemed to slow. The cat's giant paw was headed right for him, as if Rollan had shrunk to the size of a common mouse. All he saw were the rough pads of Cabaro's paw, the claws splaying out like daggers, coming nearer and nearer until it filled his vision.

Then, suddenly, he was spinning in the air.

At first all he was aware of was the blazing pain in his side. Then Rollan regained more of his senses, and discovered he was at the far shore of the lagoon. Disoriented, he shook his head and tried to stand.

Only to see a large shape barreling down on him.

“Hey —!” Rollan said, and then he was whisked into the air again. He bumped wildly against the ground as he was dragged, splashing through the water. He struggled furiously, dagger flailing, but couldn’t manage to connect with his captor.

“Put that thing away!” roared a gruff voice.

“Tarik?” Rollan said, astonished.

They disappeared into the greenery. “Get to your feet!” Tarik ordered, releasing the collar of Rollan’s shirt.

Rollan staggered up.

“Now,” Tarik said. “Run!”

They hurtled into the underbrush. “What ... happened?” Rollan asked as they ran.

“Cabaro fled,” Tarik panted. “And Gerathon followed him ... Lucky I got you away first.”

The tall man vaulted a fallen tree, and then reached back to assist Rollan. He continued speaking as they raced through the brush, his words fractured as Rollan struggled to stay near. “... split up. They went one way ... and here we are.”

With a shriek and a crash, Essix broke through the oasis canopy and landed on Rollan’s shoulder. She called out, and Rollan stopped, searching around. Tarik held still beside him.

They’d reached the far side of the oasis. The trees disappeared, replaced by a spit of sand. A cliff face towered before them, at least fifty feet high, hugging the oasis. Rollan could tell from the relatively relaxed grip of Essix’s talons that they were out of immediate danger. “We’re not being followed,” he informed Tarik. “And it’s a good thing too, since we’re trapped.”

Tarik pointed to Essix. “Do you think you could —”

“On it,” Rollan said. “Essix, can you find Conor and Irtike?”

“And Cabaro,” Tarik added.

With a sharp cry, Essix took to the air.

“That means yes, I hope?” Tarik asked, watching Essix fly off.

“Yeah,” Rollan said, wincing at the pain in his ribs. “That means yes.”

Lumeo poked out of Tarik’s satchel and peered concernedly at Rollan’s side.

“That looks bad,” Tarik said. “Would you let me look at it?”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t feel too bad.” Rollan said. Then he looked at his torso and saw his shirt was gashed and bloody. Cabaro must have slashed him when he hurled him to one side. Only now that he was looking at it did the wound begin to throb with pain.

They heard a loud shriek from above. Rollan peered up at the sky and then back at Tarik, his wound temporarily forgotten. “Sounds like Essix found Conor and Irtike.”

From within the oasis they heard shouts and clashing steel, along with the angry yips of wild dogs. “I don’t hear the voices of anyone we know,” Tarik said, “which means it’s probably Cabaro’s forces attacking the Conquerors.”

Rollan closed his eyes and let his vision merge with Essix’s. He immediately felt a surge of relief when he saw what the falcon saw: Conor and Irtike were alive. At the edge of the oasis they must have found a route where the ground rose shallowly enough that they’d been able to climb up to the cliff top above. They ran along its edge, high over the oasis. Every step they took near the precipice sent rocks skittering down the sheer fifty-foot drop.

“Come on,” Rollan said, and took off. “At the far side of the oasis, there’s a trail leading up to the top. That’s where Conor and Irtike are.”

Rollan and Tarik took off along the bottom of the cliff, making good time on the barren ground. Soon the cliff opened on the left, where a rocky streambed carved through. It was a narrow canyon, nearly dark, but from what he’d seen through Essix’s eyes, Rollan suspected it would take them up to the top.

Rollan and Tarik hurried, scrambling over logs and bumping their knees on rocks. Essix soared above them, her urgent cries pulling them onward.

The canyon was tough going, but Rollan could sense it sloping upward.

“We’re heading up!” he shouted to Tarik. “We’ll be out on the cliff top soon.”

“Then we’ll have a view of what’s going on in the oasis,” Tarik said, gasping

as he struggled forward. From the security of Tarik's satchel, Lumeo gave him encouraging squeaks.

There was a ribbon of sky above them, slowly widening as they ascended. "We're getting nearer," Rollan said. "Just a little farther now."

Then Essix's cry intensified into a shriek. Rollan looked up in alarm. A figure was at the top of the cliff, a dozen feet above. He was silhouetted by the sun, but the outline was unmistakable. Cabaro.

"Hurry," Rollan said, dashing forward under the lion's watchful eye. But then he heard a terrible grinding sound from above.

With a loud crash, the canyon went black.

Rollan was thrown from his feet, against Tarik. Together they tumbled to the rocky floor.

When the cloud of dust settled, Rollan saw what had happened: Cabaro had dropped a boulder on them. It was jagged and broad, and would easily have killed them if it had hit directly. But it hadn't, and from what he'd seen of Cabaro's agility, that had to have been his intention. What he'd done instead was block the way forward.

"He's trapped us!" Rollan said. "But why trap us when he could have just aimed that boulder nearer and killed us instead?"

They heard grunting behind them, and skittering rocks. Like something huge was passing up the canyon toward them.

"Because he doesn't need to kill us," Tarik said. He loosened his curved sword in its scabbard. "Not if someone else will do it for him."

"Oh, no," Rollan said, withdrawing his dagger. "Gerathon?"

"Or Zerif," Tarik said grimly. "Lumeo, we'll need all the help we can get."

The otter jumped out of Tarik's satchel and circled around his feet, teeth bared.

The rumbling sound got louder. Rollan watched as a nearby rock trembled from the vibrations of the approaching enemy.

"Tarik," Rollan said. "If that's Gerathon, I don't think we can take her on our own."

Tarik lay a hand on Rollan's shoulder. "We have to. So we will."

One final rasping sound, and then Gerathon appeared from around the

corner. The giant serpent nearly filled the canyon, only barely able to maneuver through. Gerathon read their perilous situation in an instant and streaked toward them, mouth terrifyingly wide, yellow fangs glistening.

Tarik took a fighting crouch, holding his curved blade in two hands. Lumeo scampered to the top of a boulder and reared on his back legs, ready to pounce. Essix landed on the boulder next to Lumeo, sharp beak open. Rollan stood with his dagger up and one leg lunged forward, bracing for impact. As much as it was worth, they were ready.

Then Rollan saw who was with Gerathon.

Around the corner, right at Gerathon's tail, was Gar. The huge man with the horned helmet strode forward, nearly as fast as the giant serpent.

It would be Gerathon who hit them first, though, and with the might of a battering ram. Her body wound far from side to side, the better to work up more power to muscle forward.

Rollan's will faltered. Gerathon *and* Gar: They really had no chance. There was no way to escape, and no way they could fend off these two. If Rollan had the Slate Elephant to enlarge Essix, or the Granite Ram to leap away, they could use them to run. But Conor had both. The only talisman Rollan had was the Coral Octopus.

At her current size, the falcon wouldn't be able to do much more than harass their enemies. Unless Briggan or Uraza appeared out of nowhere, they were doomed.

When the serpent was only a second away, Rollan saw Gerathon shift so she was heading directly for him. Tarik saw it too, and before Rollan could react he'd lunged in front. It was hard to make anything out during the flash of impact, just black scales and brown flesh. Rollan heard an agonized cry, and realized with shock that Tarik had been bitten by the serpent's enormous fang. A savage wound punctured his thigh.

"You must be Tarik," a voice intoned, muffled but resonant behind the helmet.

Gerathon reared, her black hood nearly blotting out the sky, only a bare sliver of blue visible behind her. The elder Greencloak stood his ground, bleeding profusely from the wound on his leg. Already he was shuddering from

the venom, his hands and legs trembling. Rollan had seen such movements before. Early death throes.

“Tarik ...” Rollan whimpered. “Tarik, *hold on.*”

Gar unfastened straps on either side of his helmet. “I’ve heard much about you. The stalwart Greencloak guardian, one of their finest warriors. I’ll admit, I had hoped to cross blades with you someday. I’d have preferred to fight you unhobbled by poison, but Gerathon was ... eager.”

While Gar removed his helmet, Tarik turned so he faced Rollan. “Run!” he hissed. “Run while I delay them.”

Gar had it off now. He had large eyes, his skin pale and smooth, pinked across the nose and cheeks by the Niloan sun. His mouth was twisted with contempt. “Though you have failed to protect these children, you have at least fought with honor. I will make your death quick.”

While Gar held his greatsword high, Tarik’s shudders turned into convulsions. His face, normally tan and full of life, had become as gray as slate. He blinked once, twice, his eyes flicking to the boulder behind them, only sluggishly returning to Gar and Gerathon. “Rollan ... the octopus.”

Of course. The Coral Octopus would allow Rollan to shrink and slip through a crevice. He might be able to use it to pass through the crack between the boulder and the canyon wall. But that would mean ...

Gerathon hissed in fury and slithered forward, rocks grinding to dust beneath her massive body.

“Hold, Gerathon,” Gar called, raising his greatsword high. “This one is mine. We must retrieve the talisman, above all else. You go find Cabaro.”

“You will not order me around like a common soldier!” the Great Serpent hissed, her voice reverberating against the cavern walls. “I am not your subject, *General.*”

“I’m not leaving you,” Rollan whispered to Tarik, his dagger outstretched, so puny in the face of the combined might of Gar and Gerathon.

With great effort, Tarik managed to keep his sword raised against the enemy, its tip wildly trembling, drawing circles in the air. His eyes were glassy, but even so, they flashed with anger. “I’ll be dead in seconds. Go! Don’t let the last thing I see be losing you.”

Rollan fished the Coral Octopus out of his bag and held it in his fingers, his hands trembling so much he nearly dropped it.

Lumeo scampered from the boulder and stood on Tarik's shoulder, teeth bared. Essix lunged into the air, doing her best to harry Gar. It was working for the moment — Gar feinted left and right, lashing out with the pommel of his sword, trying to avoid the bird's outstretched talons. "Tarik!" Rollan sobbed. "Don't do this."

In desperation, Rollan tugged Tarik's cloak toward the impassable boulder. With a snap, the clasp broke, and Rollan tumbled backward, the green fabric all that remained in his hands.

Tarik turned, sword in hand, and saw the cloak draped in Rollan's arms. An unexpected expression passed over his face. Hope.

That moment of distraction was all the advantage Gar needed. He brought his two-handed sword whipping through the air at Tarik. Essix only barely escaped the slash, feathers flying as she wheeled into the sky. But she managed to snag Gar's gloved hand as she went, and his mighty blade went wide. Gar readied his greatsword to strike again, grunting with exertion as he heaved the weapon high over his head.

With one hand Rollan gripped Tarik's cloak, and with the other he clasped the Coral Octopus. The edges of Rollan's vision wavered, then he became liquid and limitless. Suddenly weightless, Rollan slipped toward the boulder. He arrived at the edge, and when it met the solid surface his body became ooze, slipping easily through the scant inches of space between boulder and cliff wall.

As soon as he was on the other side, Rollan let go of the Coral Octopus and felt his boundaries sharpen again. He got to his feet in the dark canyon. Rollan kneeled and stared through the few inches of space between the boulder and the cliff wall. It was too narrow to make out what was happening on the other side, but he heard grunts and metal clanging against metal. Then, after a gasp and a horrible grinding noise, everything went silent.

Rollan stared at the small patch of ground visible through the crack. All he could spy was a booted foot, motionless. He squinted, trying to figure out whose it was.

Rollan gasped as a large, furious eye filled his vision. He and Gar stared at

each other, breathing hard, their faces inches apart. There was no way, even with Gerathon's help, that Gar would be able to budge the boulder. Rollan was safe for now. But it meant little to him.

Because Tarik was dead.

Rollan heard a familiar chattering, and Gar suddenly whirled, disappearing from view. Lumeo was on the attack. Though he desperately maneuvered around the crack, Rollan could no longer see Gar and the otter. He heard scuffling, and Essix shrieking. Gerathon was moving too — Rollan could hear more rocks crunching under her massive bulk. Lumeo had to be more agile than Gar or even Gerathon, but in the face of their might, Rollan knew there was only one way this could end.

“Lumeo, get over here!” Rollan shouted. It was possible the otter might be able to fit through the gap between boulder and canyon wall. But there were only the sounds of continued fighting. Tears in his eyes, Rollan listened to the footfalls and grunting.

He heard an agonized cry from Lumeo.

Then there was silence.

With a familiar whoosh Essix landed on Rollan's shoulder, her talons digging in. Rollan imagined what the falcon was telling him: *They gave their lives to buy you extra seconds to survive. Don't waste them.*

It all came over Rollan fresh. Tarik was dead. Lumeo was dead. An anguished sob wracked his body.

And then, gripping Tarik's cloak tightly in his fist, Rollan turned and ran for his life.

THE GOLDEN LION

WHEN THE BATTLE IN THE OASIS HAD BROKEN APART, Conor and Irtike had fled headlong into the nearest trees, whipping past branches and startling songbirds that rose into the air in waves. Conor nearly ran into Essix as they fled — the falcon was diving in the other direction, to Rollan’s aid, and he soon lost sight of her in the trees.

After minutes of heedless running, Irtike had called for them to stop. Holding Snake Eyes in her hand, she closed her eyes and spoke. “I can sense many feet vibrating the ground nearby,” she reported. “But they’re all behind us and moving away.”

“Oh,” Conor said. “We’re safe, then.” It did little to relieve him, though: If they were safe, it only meant that Rollan and Tarik were probably the ones in danger.

Irtike paused again, clutching Snake Eyes. “There are many mole rat warrens in the soil around here, and Snake Eyes is in contact with them. It seems to be strengthening my abilities. I can sense a large creature shaking the ground above us. It’s on the cliff side overlooking the oasis. Something huge ... It vanishes for a second at a time, and then pounds the ground. I think it’s leaping.”

“Cabaro,” Conor said. “That’s got to be him, right? Let’s head up there. We can only hope we find Rollan and Tarik on the way.”

With renewed purpose, they forced their way through the dense foliage. Irtike was the first to reach the edge, and peeked out from between palm fronds. “The Conquerors are all massed at the desert’s edge, where they entered,” she said. “But they’re streaming into the oasis. I can’t detect any up on the cliffs.”

“So we’ll have Cabaro to ourselves,” Conor said, not exactly relishing the thought. “But we should find Rollan and Tarik first.”

“Given their numbers, if we wander the oasis, we’ll probably run into a group of Conquerors.”

“Okay, then,” Conor said grimly. “It’s up to us to get the Golden Lion from Cabaro. Alone.”

Irtike peered up into his eyes. “We can do it.” She didn’t sound especially convinced.

“We’ll have to,” Conor said grimly. “It’s our only hope.”

“Come on,” Irtike said. “At one side of the oasis is a shallow enough incline that we should be able to scramble up.”

They picked their way along the cliff face at the back of the oasis, Irtike leading the way, Snake Eyes tight in her hand. Sure enough, they came to an area of the cliff that was partially fallen — it would still be a steep climb, but they should be able to make it.

Irtike ascended with a sureness that astonished Conor. Her slender feet chose only the rocks that wouldn’t slide away. He tailed after her, choosing the same surfaces she did. After a few minutes of exertion, they were above the tree line. Their position felt dangerously exposed, but he heard no cries from the Conquerors in the oasis, nor could he see any — their enemies were shrouded by the thick greenery. The passage shallowed out more as they neared the top, but also turned gravelly. They switched to all fours when the terrain got clogged with shards of sandstone. As they reached the summit, the vantage point was finally high enough for Conor to see the extent of the army below. Hundreds of soldiers swarmed the far edge of the oasis. The wild dogs were fleeing into the desert, chased by Conquerors on horseback.

The top of the cliff was an open desert mesa above the oasis, the ground made of dry, cracked stone. Conor and Irtike crouched behind a boulder. It was their last opportunity for cover before they emerged into the open. “Cabaro’s

vibrations in the earth are near,” Irtike reported. “He’s at the center of the mesa. We should see him to our left when we emerge.”

He leaned out, and indeed saw Cabaro not a hundred yards away. Conor cautiously stepped out into the open, Irtike at his side. He had no chance of besting the giant cat in open combat, he knew, but he figured he’d try to talk Cabaro into putting the Golden Lion into Greencloak hands — maybe now that he could see the Conqueror army with his own eyes, he’d be more willing to collaborate.

Cabaro spotted them immediately, and went from a run to a sprint, heading right for them, the muscles of his long body rippling. Seeing the giant cat bearing down, Conor went numb. His empty hands seemed like feeble weapons indeed, and fear set his pulse to pounding so violently that his thoughts beat against one another. “Ir ... Irtike ...” he mumbled. “Run. *Run!*”

Irtike had Snake Eyes in hand, and held him right in front of her face. Some part of Conor noticed what she was doing, and figured she might be saying her final good-byes to her spirit animal. But then something strange happened. Something Conor would have thought impossible.

Cabaro disappeared.

The lion was hurtling forward, and then suddenly he was gone, vanished into the earth. Then he emerged again, scrambling out of a pit. After he’d managed to struggle out, he sprawled onto the earth on all fours. He started forward, but the ground gave out under him again. “What’s happening?” Conor asked Irtike.

She didn’t answer. Conor looked at Irtike and saw she still had Snake Eyes in front of her, staring deep into his ugly face. “Irtike?” Conor asked.

This time the hole in the ground expanded before Cabaro could struggle out of it. Conor was baffled. Cabaro had spent centuries living in this area — wouldn’t he know better than to run where the ground couldn’t support him? Then something struck Conor.

“Irtike,” he said, “are you doing this?”

She didn’t answer, deep in concentration. Sweat was pouring down her face.

The hole in the earth continued to grow. With a great roar, sandstone and soil tumbled into its gaping maw. Cabaro had sunk enough that Conor could only see the top of his mane as he tried to leap free. The force of his jumps only made the

ground collapse more, though. With a yowl, Cabaro stumbled and fell deeper into the crumbling rock.

The sinkhole stopped growing bigger, and for a moment its edges quivered. Then the sides began tumbling toward the middle. With a sliding roar, the sinkhole filled in — with Cabaro trapped in the center. Only his head was visible, the rest of the Great Beast immobilized under the pressing soil.

Conor gingerly tested the ground. It felt crumbly under his foot, but held under his lesser weight. Cautiously stepping over the upturned earth to the spot where Cabaro was mired, Conor stared down at the Great Beast. Despite the memory of the grievous wounds Cabaro had caused Briggan, he felt pity for such a mighty animal to be brought so low.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Cabaro, “but we need the Golden Lion. For the good of Erdas.”

The lion glowered at him. The earth trapping him puckered and shifted. He must have been struggling under the surface.

Conor eased even nearer. Best to seize the talisman before Cabaro managed to free himself.

“Irtike, can you help me?” Conor asked. But the girl didn’t answer. Conor looked at her and saw she was totally still, riveted in concentration. Sweat had soaked through her clothing. It was her power that was keeping Cabaro trapped, but she wouldn’t be able to maintain it much longer. Even Snake Eyes looked tired, his little head drooping.

Almost guiltily, Conor reached out to the back of Cabaro’s neck. He lifted the mane to get to the talisman’s clasp, shards of sandstone falling from the lion’s hair. The golden rope was surprisingly heavy, and Conor had to strain with both hands to get it free and drag it off Cabaro. The Great Beast had to be furious, and Conor was grateful to be at the back of his head, nowhere near the lion’s jaws.

Conor carried the talisman over to Irtike, who was still standing motionless, lost in concentration. “I’ve got the Golden Lion,” he said. “Let’s go.”

For a moment Irtike was still lost to whatever inner place was the source of her power. Then she shook her head clear and came around. “I feel ... so weak,” she said to Conor.

“Are you okay?” Conor asked.

Holding on to Conor for support, Irtike nodded and nestled Snake Eyes in her bag. She pointed to Cabaro, who was still motionless. “I’m too exhausted. I’m releasing my power over the earth,” she said. “Cabaro will be able to get himself free once he thinks to try.”

“Which means we have to get out of here.”

“Yes,” Irtike said. “Immediately.”

Wordlessly, they made their way as fast as they could to the edge of the cliff. While they went, Conor wrapped the gold rope around his waist, tying it off securely. The talisman bounced against his hip.

As they approached the spot of scuffed earth and open air that led down to the oasis, a nameless dread overtook Conor. Suddenly he wasn’t sure he wanted to see what was below. Sucking in a breath, he forced himself to look.

There had been a canyon running from the oasis up to the mesa, but it was now blocked off by a huge boulder. Conor couldn’t see below the obstruction, but he did notice a set of human footprints heading up the canyon and around the bend, toward the cliff side.

As he stared down the canyon, Conor heard a familiar screech. “That’s Essix,” he said to Irtike. “Come on!”

Together they raced along the canyon’s edge. Essix came into view as they turned a corner, hovering in the open air over the gap.

Down below was a huddled form that Conor recognized. “Rollan?” he called. “Are you okay?”

Rollan slowly looked up, then stared back down at something cradled in his hands.

“*Rollan*,” Conor said again, waving and pointing at the Golden Lion around his waist. “I have it! We have to find Tarik and get out of here.”

“Tarik?” Rollan said. He sounded confused, as if he’d just been woken from a dream. “Tarik is dead.”

That was when Conor noticed what Rollan was holding. A tattered green cloak, blooming with dark blood, was bunched tightly in the boy’s fingers. “No ...” Conor whispered.

Rollan finally released the cloak and covered his face with his hands. “He

died saving me. Gar killed him.”

Conor’s heart dropped into his stomach. The world felt too bright, and his body too light. He worried he might faint.

He steeled himself. Everything depended on the Golden Lion. If they didn’t escape with it, Tarik’s death would be in vain. Tarik’s death. His *death*. Conor shook his head violently. “We have to get you out of there,” he called down.

“You can’t,” Rollan said emotionlessly. “This streambed doesn’t go all the way up. I already tried. It hits a wall.”

Conor reached into his satchel and pulled out the Slate Elephant, the stone cool under his fingers. “Then use this.”

He tossed it down. It rang out against a rock at the bottom, and rolled to a stop at Rollan’s feet.

He didn’t budge.

“Rollan!” Conor barked, surprised by the force behind his own voice. “Pick it up. *Now!*”

The shouting worked. As if of its own accord, Rollan’s hand reached out and grasped the Slate Elephant, then he placed the loop over his neck. Immediately Essix more than doubled in size. The falcon’s wings were now nearly half as broad as the canyon was wide.

Essix folded her wings and arrowed into the canyon, unfurling them just as she reached Rollan. Talons hooking into his shirt, she seized the motionless boy and lifted, her great wingstrokes gusting rocks and pebbles about the rocky bottom. Rollan shielded his eyes as he was lifted into the air. Essix gently lowered him to the ground beside Conor, where the boy slumped in the dirt.

“We’ll grieve Tarik later,” Conor said. “For now, Gerathon and Gar and a few hundred Conquerors are still out there waiting for us. We have to get out of here right away. Okay?”

Rollan met Conor’s eyes. For a moment his face was blank. Then he reluctantly nodded.

Tarik is dead. The reality of it yawned right below Conor’s thoughts, but he refused to let himself look into that horrible black space. Between exhausted Irtike and overwhelmed Rollan, they’d be lucky to make it out of the oasis alive. If Conor lost his wits now, they were all done for — and that meant the Devourer

won. He looked into Irtike's and Rollan's slack faces. "The oasis below is crawling with Conquerors. We can't go that way."

Irtike shook her head. "There's a reason Cabaro's ostriches guarded that pass so heavily. The desert stretches for weeks of travel in the other directions. We'd die if we went any way other than the way we came. And that means passing back through the oasis."

Conor wanted to collapse. If only Tarik were here, he could hand this decision to him. But he wasn't here. Tarik never would be here again.

"Okay," Conor said. "Then we take the side trail back down. From there, we'll ... I don't know. We'll have to find a way through, that's all."

"It's the best plan we've got," Irtike said, smiling wearily. She took Conor's hand in one of hers, and Rollan's limp one in the other. Together, they all turned around.

And saw the canyon was teeming with Conquerors.

The black-armored men and women had swarmed up the narrow trail, and were beginning to surround Cabaro in the sand pit. Zerif was leading them, directing his soldiers to circle the Great Beast. There were shouts and confusion; Zerif probably thought Cabaro still had the Golden Lion.

He probably also thought Cabaro was still trapped — but Irtike was no longer pressing the earth against him. With a roar and a whoosh of air, Cabaro suddenly pounced from the pit, twisting magnificently in the air. He came down ten feet away, a whirlwind of paws and teeth, bowling over the Conquerors unfortunate enough to be near. The giant lion crouched on all fours, jaws snapping crazily. Zerif cursed and dropped back while his soldiers scattered.

"I think Cabaro's going to survive," Irtike said.

"And this is a perfect distraction. Go!" Conor said.

Together they streaked toward the side trail. There were shouts from the Conquerors assembled around Cabaro. Conor could only hope that they had enough of a head start. The companions barreled around the corner, preparing to race down the trail.

And nearly lost themselves in the mouth of a giant serpent.

Gerathon was slithering up the path, her huge muscular body filling the narrow space. She'd nearly reached the top when they rounded the corner,

surprising her as much as she did them. Quick-thinking Essix was the first to spring into action, her enlarged form arrowing right into Gerathon's hood, where it had already been gashed during the combat at the lagoon. The falcon wasn't able to build the momentum she'd have needed to do real damage, but Gerathon wheeled and thrashed, trying to avoid Essix's sharp beak, sandstone rocks crushing to dust behind her.

"Retreat!" Conor ordered. "Back up to the cliff." He yanked on Irtike and Rollan, and together they spun and ran back up to the cliff top.

But Zerif and the Conquerors were ready for them. The moment the companions left the trailhead, they were surrounded. Zerif made his way toward them through the ranks of his men. He brandished his curved sword, a leer on his face.

Behind them, Gerathon hissed in triumph and closed in.

"Raise your weapons!" Conor said, despite the terror in his chest. Rollan lifted his long dagger. From somewhere in Irtike's bag, Snake Eyes chittered.

Was this resistance pointless? Putting up a fight would only delay the inevitable — they'd die in this battle, there was no doubt of that.

Then light came into Rollan's eyes for the first time. "The Golden Lion!"

"What does it do?!" Conor cried as the Conquerors advanced. They were almost in striking distance.

"Does it matter?" Rollan shouted. "Just use it!"

Conor gripped his fingers tight around the Golden Lion and summoned his will. *Whatever you have, show me now.*

Then Conor roared.

When he opened his mouth, a sound emerged that was far louder than any the Great Beast himself had ever made. As the high-pitched and deafening roar reached them, the nearest Conquerors fell to their stomachs, clutching their ears. Whenever Conor faced them, they were physically pushed back by waves of sound.

"Conor!" Irtike cried. He turned and saw an oversized hyena approaching. Its eyes were crazed, rabid foam spilling from its snapping jaws. The beast was cackling and lunging, its jaws almost closing on Irtike's leg.

When Conor faced it and opened his mouth, the hyena was thrown back by

the roar. The noise was painfully loud for Conor, but he could only imagine how much worse it was for the hapless creatures in front of him.

With Rollan and Irtike tight at his back, Conor swept in a circle, the cone of force pushing Conquerors back wherever it pointed. By training his roar on any Conquerors that tried to rush forward, Conor was able to keep them at bay.

Even Gerathon was held back by the sound. She writhed and twisted, her body curling over itself, mashing the unlucky Conquerors trapped between her scales and the ground.

“What now?!” Rollan shouted over the roar.

“We’re still trapped,” Irtike said.

Conor released the lion for a moment and took a big breath, wiping the back of his hand over his lips. “Maybe we can move through them, and if I spin around fast enough they won’t be able to get near enough to attack,” he said.

“I have a better idea,” Irtike said. “The ground is trembling from the sinkhole, and the weight of the army, and now all that noise. It wouldn’t take much for this whole cliff to give way.” She dug in her bag and pulled out Snake Eyes. He cringed in her hand, clearly in pain from all the roaring. “I know you’re tired, but I need your help one more time, okay?”

The ground started to ripple and shudder. Shouts rose among the Conquerors, and Gerathon, despite her pain, raised her head, hood outstretched terrifyingly. “Get back!” she hissed at the Conquerors.

But it was too late.

The earth shook beneath him, and Conor turned toward the precipice just in time to see the edge pour down into the oasis below, as if all the sandstone had turned to water. The ground sighed toward the ring of jungle.

“Irtike?” Conor asked, trying to keep his balance. But the girl had gone back into her trance. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she swayed.

The hush of the falling sand became a roar. Conor watched, paralyzed by fear, as the cliff edge began to cascade away. “Conor,” Rollan said, “we need to get moving!”

More and more of the cliff side fell, until it was a landslide. Conor took one step away, but his heels sank into the sand. His body was tugged backward, and he only just managed to get hold of Rollan’s and Irtike’s hands before he

tumbled.

Above the roar of falling sand, he heard the screams of the plummeting Conquerors. Then he pitched to one side and saw nothing but a wide yellow rush, as if they were drowning in a sea of sand. The beating waves of it pounded his skin, scouring it raw. Conor tried to keep his mouth closed, hoping to keep the earth from entering his lungs.

He pivoted in the darkness, riding the avalanche of sand, clenching his friends' hands as tightly as he could. They gained speed as they went, and his head began to wrench against the tumbling soil — all it would take was one bad hit for his neck to snap. But just as he began to wonder whether he'd die that way, or by passing out and suffocating under the weight of the crumbling sandstone, he began to slow.

Miraculously, hot sun was on his face. He felt it warm his eyelids, and breathed in the sweet air. Conor opened his eyes and was relieved to find Rollan and Irtike laid out beside him, gulping in air.

The oasis was gone.

Where there had once been a paradise shielded by a cliff, there was now only a blank slope, like a giant bowl of sand. Everything that had made up Cabaro's animal kingdom — the lagoon, the trees — was buried. The last plumes of sand that were still airborne settled over the land. Then all was still.

Until it began to move.

The sand rippled. It made a wave, over a dozen feet long, and then a long black shape started to emerge, many yards off. Gerathon.

The Great Serpent was clearly disoriented. She faced away, scanning the flattened landscape as sand rained from her scales.

"Guys," Conor whispered, "we need to run. Now."

Irtike struggled to rise. Rollan was motionless, his mouth hanging open. "Rollan?" Conor asked as he staggered to his feet. "Are you okay?"

For a long moment, Rollan was still. His face was covered in sand, the whites of his eyes the only parts that weren't yellow. He shook his head, as if to clear it. "Could you help me get up?"

"Of course," Conor whispered. He pulled on Rollan's arm, and Rollan winced as he stood. The wound in his side had reopened in the landslide. Blood

soaked his shirt.

“Can you run?” Conor asked.

“I hope so,” Rollan whispered back.

They took off through the sand, legs kicking high to stay clear of the loose earth. Conor’s whole body screamed — it felt like his skin had been flayed in the landslide. But all it took was imagining Gerathon slithering over the dunes toward them to find the will to move forward.

Essix kept pace with them, high above. “I’m realizing,” Conor said as he puffed forward with his struggling friends, “that there are a lot of advantages to being a bird.”

As the sand grew shallower, their going became easier, and they were soon able to trek more quickly. Conor risked a look backward. A few figures were struggling out of the sand, but they were having a slow time of it. “No more sign of Gerathon,” he reported. “She must have gone the other way. And we seem to have a head start.”

There was no answer.

Conor looked to his friends, and the first thing he saw was their stricken faces. He followed their gazes, worried that he’d made a mistake, that Rollan or Irtike had seen Gerathon bearing down on them after all. But what he saw was worse.

It was Tarik.

The elder Greencloak’s body had been carried along in the cascading sand and was half-in and half-out. Only the head and shoulders were above the ground.

Lumeo lay still beside him. The sand had carried the otter so that he was curled beneath his companion’s neck, cradling Tarik’s chin. They looked ... peaceful.

“Oh, Tarik,” Conor said softly, turning away and covering his face. The Golden Lion was even heavier around his waist. He shifted his fingers over the talisman, thinking about how much they’d lost to get it. How much more could this quest possibly take from them?

“We should bring their bodies with us,” Rollan said numbly.

“We can’t,” Conor said, hating himself for it. “We have so many miles to go,

and once the Conquerors get organized they'll be on us. We don't have Tarik to protect us anymore. We need to get out of here as fast as we can."

"So is that how things are now?" Rollan asked sharply. Conor turned and saw his friend's eyes were still on Tarik, but his face had clouded over. "Kind, gentle Conor finally gets *hard*? He starts making the *tough* decisions? Now that Tarik's dead, does that make *you* our fearless leader?"

Conor's voice caught in his throat. "Please, Rollan," he rasped. "Don't do this right now."

"I liked you better the old way," Rollan snapped, his eyes flashing. "I liked the sheep boy."

Conor nodded. "I did too," he said softly. "But he's gone."

Rollan's anger seemed to deflate all at once. He dropped his gaze back to Tarik and stayed silent.

Irtike held Snake Eyes up and peered into his beady little eyes. "I can use my power to bury him, if you want."

Conor deferred to Rollan, who nodded.

At first nothing happened. Then the sand around them rumbled. It caved in, sinking Tarik and Lumeo into the earth. Conor watched, hands pressed tight over his heart, as the body disappeared.

"Thank you, Irtike," Rollan whispered.

As the sand fell in, Irtike broke her trance and faced them. "I'm not sure how many more times I can draw on my earth affinity today," she said. "I don't feel so good."

"We'll do our best to avoid it. And thank you," Conor said. "He deserved to be buried."

"Yes, he did," Irtike said. "I only knew Tarik for a short time, but I could already see his kindness and honor."

"Snake Eyes isn't the right name for that mole rat," Rollan said, petting the groggy rodent. "I'm sorry for anything bad I ever said about him. He saved our lives."

"I was thinking about that," Irtike said. "I'd like to name him Mikak. It's a word in my language that's hard to translate. It means both 'soil' and 'home.'"

"I like it," Rollan said. "Thank you, Mikak."

In response, the mole rat lowered his head and fell asleep.

“Let’s go,” Conor said, gently touching Rollan on the back. “Tarik’s sacrifice will only be in vain if we don’t make it back safely.”

Rollan nodded, wiping away tears.

“And your mother,” Conor added quietly to Irtike. “She gave her life fighting the Conquerors in Nilo too.”

The group began to walk away, back toward the pass that would lead them to northern Nilo, and eventually to Greenhaven. Essix flew above them, her sharp eyes scanning for danger.

They hadn’t gone more than a hundred yards when Conor noticed a dark shape reaching out of the sand. “Wait, is that ... ?”

Irtike whimpered, and Rollan’s hand was immediately on the hilt of his dagger. “Gar,” he growled.

“Relax,” Conor said, his hand on Rollan’s arm. “He’s not moving.”

They moved closer to the body, which lay completely still. The general’s dark armor was caked in bright yellow sand. Blood had dried over a grievous neck wound.

Gar was dead.

“Tarik must have killed him,” Rollan said. “Or he died in the avalanche.”

“No,” Conor said, peering down. “Look at this.” The wound was covered in sand, but he could see bite marks all along Gar’s throat. There was only one explanation. “Lumeo,” Conor said, the world wavering as his eyes filled with tears. “He avenged Tarik’s death after all.”

“Wow,” Rollan whispered. “The Devourer ... is dead. Lumeo killed the Devourer. We stand a chance because of that brave otter. Way to go, little guy.”

He kicked out, shoving Gar’s body farther into the sand. As Gar rolled forward, a dark, furry shape was revealed, crushed beneath him.

“What’s that?” Rollan asked.

Conor kneeled and squinted, then sucked in a breath. He tried to process what he was seeing, but it didn’t make sense. What was it doing *here*, with *Gar*?

He peered up at Rollan and Irtike.

“It’s a wolverine,” he said.

SUNDOWN

DURING THEIR DAYS AT SEA, ABEKE WONDERED SOMETIMES why Shane's spirit animal wasn't some aquatic creature instead of a wolverine — he was so natural onboard the ship, with an uncanny sense of currents and squalls. Whenever they hit doldrums he'd cleanly dive into the ocean, cutting through the salt water only to emerge with a tropical fish writhing on the end of his spear. He'd ably climb a free line to get back to the deck, and kill and scale the fish before wriggling back into his shirt.

Abeke was used to being the hunter and provisioner among her friends. It felt new and strange to be cared for so completely. She found herself enjoying it.

They were lucky to be on Shane's family's ship, which he clearly knew so well; otherwise they could never have managed an oceangoing vessel with just the two of them. Truth be told, they made a great team: Whole hours would go by wordlessly, Abeke tying off lines the moment Shane tossed them to her, scaling the mast to lower the bib before he'd even asked for it. In her moments of rest, Abeke would watch the passing shoreline. The first region they passed as they voyaged their way up the continent of Nilo was the great desert, where Cabaro the Lion was rumored to live — then the jungles, and then the steppes where Abeke had grown up.

She was shocked at how close they'd been to Cabaro. The Great Lion would

likely have been the next talisman her friends sought. Had they ... Could they possibly have been close by?

It was a small blessing to have so much to do. Otherwise Abeke would have stewed. There was so much to worry about: what was happening to Meilin; whether Conor and Rollan and Tarik made it out of Oceanus; what they'd find when they arrived at Greenhaven; how to make sure she could keep her promise to Shane that the Greencloaks wouldn't harm him.

He'd been their enemy for so long. He was with the Conqueror teams in Oceanus, and Samis, and even at Dinesh's temple. It was hard to predict how Olvan and Lenori and Tarik would react to him. How could Abeke show them all he'd sacrificed?

She wouldn't have long to wait. Already there was a rim of green visible at the blue lip of the horizon: Greenhaven. The winds were low, though, and the sky was pinking. They wouldn't be able to dock before nightfall.

Shane and Abeke hadn't needed to speak all afternoon, going about their tasks in companionable silence. The wood of the deck, still hot from the afternoon sun, seared the soles of Abeke's feet as she gutted the day's catch — dinner would be two flying fish and a few unlucky squid that had come too near the surface to feed.

When he saw the distant shore, Shane turned listless, standing at the bow and peering into the cliffs of Greenhaven, stubbled with bright green shrubs.

Once she'd gotten the embers up and the fish and squid were on the grill, Abeke stood beside Shane and looked out at the cliffs. Part of her soared with relief at the thought of Greenhaven, but worry bubbled insistently beneath. What was she leading Shane into?

"Have you ever seen Greenhaven before?" she asked.

Shane laughed. "Are you kidding? It would be the first and last time if I did."

"They'll understand," Abeke said softly. "I'll make them understand."

Shane closed his eyes, the lids pink-orange in the reflected sunset. "I love that you think so. That you have that much faith about people."

"Hey," Abeke said. "You were raised to believe that your uncle was doing the right thing. It was all you knew from the time you were a child. How could

you have seen what the Conquerors were doing when you were *inside* it?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I guess you’re right.”

“It was like my family,” Abeke said. “I’d always suspected that my father liked Soama more than me, that he always expected lesser things from me. But I didn’t know it was true until I summoned Uraza. I know now that in that moment my father should have been proud. But instead he was suspicious. You helped me see that I was special, even when I couldn’t.”

Shane turned to Abeke. The fading sunlight lit the fine lines of his brow, his nose, his throat. Abeke swallowed. “People can change,” she said. “And the Greencloaks are no different. They’ll see what you’ve done to help. They’ll hear what Gar did to your sister, and they’ll understand why you’ve come to our side.”

“You really are amazing,” Shane said huskily.

Abeke cast her eyes to the deck, her face flushing. “I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe ... that he killed her. That my uncle would let Gerathon do that to Drina. I miss her. We fought plenty, but I loved her.”

Abeke looked at Shane, startled. It was the first time he’d spoken about Drina’s death. Whenever she brought it up, he’d say he didn’t want to talk. But now he was finally opening up, and she was honored that he’d started feeling safer with her. “It’s terrible, Shane,” Abeke said. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through. It’s one thing to lose your sister, but another to see that it was your *uncle* who took her. We were accustomed to death in Okaihee. But not death ... in that way.”

“Drina bonded to her spider without the Nectar,” Shane said. “And she was sick for years afterward. Back then, I took care of her every day. She was such a strong person, I think sometimes she resented me for her own weakness. That was why she took the Bile, to cure her bonding sickness. But ever since then, she was ... defensive. She came on too strong, even when she didn’t need to. I tried to convince her that she was overstepping her bounds around Gerathon, but she was tired of me taking care of her. Instead, she blundered forward in her usual way, taking on more than she could handle.”

Shane let out a deep breath. It sounded like one he’d been holding for a long time. “I’d have made a similar mistake eventually, and it would have been the

end of me. I ... hope I'm doing the right thing. What other choice do I have?"

Abeke laid her hand on his forearm. It was strong and warm, the hairs bright golden blond and the skin pink from sunburn. "You did. I owe you my life for the decision you made."

"Your friends should imprison me," Shane said. "If I were in their position, that's exactly what I'd do."

Abeke smiled encouragingly. "Maybe they will, for a few days. But I'll come take care of you, like you've cared for me. They're good people, and once they understand where you're coming from, they'll relent. The Greencloaks are merciful."

"I hear what you're saying, but all the same I can't really feel it. I'll have to let your faith stand in for mine," Shane said.

Abeke nodded, staring at the skyline. Greenhaven was getting larger on the horizon, a beautiful clean square of pebble gray, gleaming in the twilight. "I wish we could go ashore tonight," Abeke said. "But the docks are unlit, and I'm afraid that if we arrive in the dark, a guard might hurt us before we can explain. I want them to know we're not sneaking up on them."

"It's okay," Shane said. "What's one more night, right?"

They dropped anchor a few hundred yards from the castle walls, and ate their grilled dinner as the sun fell. The stars gradually emerged, their bright swaths more familiar to Abeke by now than the constellations of her old home, far to the south. Abeke remembered the evenings she'd stood watch for her companions, Uraza at her side. The leopard had sat bolt upright throughout the night, peering into the sky.

Once they finished their meal, Abeke summoned Uraza and gave her the remainder of the fish. Shane hadn't summoned his wolverine the whole time they'd been on the ship — apparently it got distressed around water. Abeke suspected that maybe Shane's connection to Renneg was weaker than he'd care to admit. Perhaps his reassurance wasn't enough to keep the creature calm on the boat. Not wanting to embarrass him, she didn't force the issue, and kept Uraza in dormant form more often than not.

Abeke ran her fingers through Uraza's sleek fur and stared deep into her purple eyes. Uraza conspicuously avoided looking at Shane. "It's okay," Abeke

said, “we can trust him now.”

Uraza allowed herself to check out Shane, then returned her gaze haughtily to Abeke. Evidently she wasn't as sure.

Stroking the leopard, Abeke's thoughts wandered to the next morning. With luck it would only be a few hours before she'd see everyone again. She couldn't wait to embrace them, tell them all that had happened, and get working on a plan to rescue Meilin. She wondered how it would feel with Shane there — Rollan especially would lay into the former Conqueror, but Conor would probably come to understand. They all would.

FUNERAL

TARIK'S FUNERAL WAS HELD IN THE GREAT HALL OF Greenhaven. It was a brilliant, sunstruck morning, and as the sun rose in the sky, its light cascaded through the open circle in the roof, pooling golden light around Tarik's ceremonial sarcophagus. Olvan had initially placed Conor and Rollan at the front of the assemblage, in a position of honor, but Lenori, with her usual wisdom, had quietly ushered the boys to the back of the hall so they could grieve in more privacy. "You've been through so much," she'd said. "If you need to leave during the ceremony, it will be easier this way."

At first Conor hadn't felt the need to move to the back, and had done so only for the sake of Rollan, who still seemed dazed after their trials in Nilo. But now, as the ceremony entered its second hour, he was glad to be at the rear. His head nodded while the Greencloaks came up one by one to praise Tarik's accomplishments. He'd had one good night's sleep in a familiar bed, yes, but it had still been less than twenty-four hours since they dragged themselves into Greenhaven, the boys' skin still red and scratched from the whipping sands of Nilo.

He wished Irtike were there with them — he'd come to rely on her quiet, confident presence. But though she promised to come to Greenhaven eventually, she'd decided to stay in Nilo for the time being. When they'd said good-bye at

the shore, Irtike had headed north toward Okaihee. It was for the best — Pojalo would have need of her powers if he hoped to keep his people safe.

Thinking of Irtike, though, brought back all the dark times in Nilo as well. Conor couldn't prevent his mind from summoning the terrifying sight of Gerathon bearing down, fangs glistening. Or Gar's corpse, and the sad final image of Tarik and Lumeo sinking into the earth. The sarcophagus at the front of the great hall was partially open, to show that it was empty. It was only a symbol.

The great hall had been Tarik's favorite spot in all of Greenhaven. Conor had often found him here daydreaming, about what, he never thought to ask. It was appropriate that this was where they held the ceremony that would celebrate his life. Greencloak after Greencloak went up to the front dais to speak.

Monte, who'd renewed his oaths after Barlow's death during the Arax mission, told the story of when Tarik had cornered him in his shop at Boulder City, acting out each part. He did an excellent Tarik impression, bringing his voice low and softly accenting the ends of his sentences. Scrubber, his raccoon, flailed and squirmed on the ground, pretending to be Monte himself. It was a light moment in the funeral, and set the whole audience laughing.

Lishay was laughing long after the rest of the assembled had stopped. She'd made the long trip from Pharsit Nang to be present, despite the danger of escaping Conqueror-occupied Zhong. When she spoke, the room quieted, and she told her own story of their time together as Greencloak recruits, when Tarik had once left their jerky behind at camp, accidentally grabbing a piece of old tree bark instead. He was so stubborn, she said, he chewed the thing for a whole day. Despite his fatigue, Conor found himself laughing and crying at the same time, great tears of mourning rolling down his smiling face.

Rollan, though, held silent throughout the ceremony. Conor cut nervous glances at his friend, who watched, glassy-eyed, while the various Greencloaks spoke. Conor nudged him from time to time, just to make sure he'd react. Rollan batted his friend away and hunched down, staring forward with his chin cupped in his hands.

Finally it was Olvan's turn to speak. The burly leader of the Greencloaks stood before them all, dwarfed only by his enormous moose spirit animal, which

clomped behind him on the dais. He paused for a long moment before his bellowing voice began to reverberate in the great hall, all the way up to the cloudless sky. “When we lost Tarik,” he orated, “we nearly lost our hearts. His quiet dignity and wise leadership exemplified the foundations upon which all our work rests. But let us remember that his life and Lumeo’s were given to an end. For now, thanks to his efforts — and those of Conor and Rollan and our new friends Irtike and her mole rat, Mikak — another talisman is safely out of the Conqueror’s hands. And thanks to Lumeo’s heroic sacrifice, General Gar lays slain. Erdas still has a hope of remaining safe.”

Olvan stepped to the head of the sarcophagus, where engraved stone laurels jutted out, and hung the Golden Lion of Cabaro from one of the leaves. Then Lishay passed him more and more talismans to hang in Tarik’s honor. Olvan announced the names of each as he placed them. “The Golden Lion joins the other talismans we have fought so hard to keep safe. The Slate Elephant of Dinesh. The Bronze Eagle of Halawir. The Silver Wolf of Briggan. The Amber Leopard of Uraza. The Bamboo Panda of Jhi. The Copper Falcon of Essix. The Obsidian Ape of Kovo. The Marble Swan of Ninani.”

Olvan gestured to the assembled talismans, dangling in the morning sunlight. “These represent the sum of our work. Though Tarik will live on in our memories, he also lives on in the legacy of the talismans. Without these, Kovo cannot escape his prison. I know Tarik would want us to celebrate those among us today who helped gather the talismans: Conor, Rollan, and the Keeper.”

Conor felt his face flush as the Greencloaks got to their feet and applauded. He hated being the center of attention. It didn’t seem right, anyway, being applauded while Meilin and Abeke were still missing.

Evidently Rollan was thinking the same thing. He rubbed the bandaged wound on his leg. When the applause continued, he seemed unable to take it anymore. He got to his feet and made a silencing motion.

The room became quiet. Rollan looked around for a long moment, taking in the crowd. Conor sensed Meilin would be proud of Rollan’s newfound seriousness, and wished she could see him now. “I understand that there’s reason to celebrate,” Rollan said. “But Tarik would want us to remain vigilant. This fight is far from over, and two of our friends still remain in the hands of the

Conquerors.”

He stepped down the aisle, the slippers the healers had given him making hushed scuffing sounds on the marble floor. He approached Olvan and kneeled, pulling two items from a pocket inside his green cloak. “I present the remaining two talismans. The Granite Ram of Arax and the Coral Octopus of Mulop. The talisman that brought us all together and ... and the last one that Tarik was alive to see. The one that saved my life.”

Rollan lowered his two talismans into the crack between the empty sarcophagus and its lid. “Until we need them, I’d like to keep these two right inside here. Because without Tarik and Lumeo, the Greencloaks ... we ... never would have gotten them.”

“You wear Tarik’s cloak with honor, Rollan,” Olvan said. “He would be proud to see you among us today.”

Conor got to his feet, hand over his chest. Something about that empty space filled with two of the talismans they had sacrificed so much to protect made Conor’s heart clench so tightly it hurt.

A hand tugged on his sleeve.

Conor whirled to see Lenori, her face pale. “Please come with me,” she said.

“No, really, I’m fine, don’t worry,” Conor said.

“That’s not it,” Lenori said. “Please come.”

Already overwhelmed, Conor was secretly glad to leave the great hall early. He shot a guilty look to Rollan, who was still kneeling at the front with his eyes closed, then let Lenori guide him out the back exit.

“What is it?” Conor asked as they sped along the hallway. They passed almost no one in the hallways — all the Greencloaks were at the ceremony. Conor could barely keep up, breaking into a jog as Lenori glided along as elegantly as her rainbow ibis. The feathers she’d weaved into her hair fluttered behind her.

Finally they were at the entrance to the courtyard. “There,” Lenori said, pointing forward. “See who’s here for you!”

Conor blinked in the bright sun while his eyes adjusted. Then he saw a familiar figure in the center of the courtyard, arms crossed nervously across her chest. Abeke.

Conor dashed across the courtyard, barely able to slow himself down enough to avoid knocking her down. They spun in a tight circle, both laughing at the sudden pleasure of being reunited. “You’re safe!” Conor said, pressing away. “Oh, let me look at you!”

“Yes!” Abeke said. “And you’re safe too. Lenori told me about your time in Nilo. I wish so much I had been there, Conor. Meilin and I were imprisoned not far away.”

Conor hugged Abeke again. There was so much to talk about — including, eventually, Abeke’s father and sister ... and Tarik. He didn’t know how much Lenori had told her already. But first, something else weighed much heavier in Conor’s mind. “Meilin ... ?”

“Is still captured,” Abeke said. “Alive — at least she was when I left. I was able to escape, but she’s still there.”

“Is she hurt? Is she still under Gerathon’s control? How did *you* get away?”

Abeke smiled. “There will be plenty of time to catch up on everything. Lenori said you’ve only just returned.”

“Yeah,” Conor said, nodding gravely. “Rollan ... He’s not himself right now. I hope he’ll be better soon, but Tarik ... There’s so much to tell you, Abeke.”

“And I have a lot to tell you. I didn’t make it out alone — I had someone helping me.”

“What do you mean?”

Abeke let out a long breath. “Sometimes we can be wrong about people, right? Sometimes our hearts are screaming something at us, but we refuse to listen.”

“Abeke,” Conor said. “What are you saying?”

She turned her head to one side and looked into the woods at the edge of the courtyard. “Shane,” she called. “You can come out!”

Conor could scarcely believe his eyes when Shane walked out of the trees. He looked even taller and broader than he had before, but there was plenty of worry in his expression. With good reason.

Conor’s hand went to the hilt of his hand ax. “Abeke. What is he doing here?”

Abeke laid a hand on Conor’s arm, stilling him. “He brought me here. It’s

because of Shane that I'm alive."

"Stop," Lenori said from where she was standing by the castle entrance, shocked at the sight of Shane. "Stop right there!"

Shane stood still, arms at his sides, palms upturned. "Please, arrest me if you need to. I understand why you wouldn't trust me." He grimaced. "I have no loyalty to the Conquerors anymore. Please, let me help you. I just ask you not to attack me right away."

"Abeke," Conor said, hand on the ax hilt, his eyes never leaving Shane, "move away from him."

She shook her head. "Conor. Listen to me. You don't understand!"

"No, *you* don't understand!" came an unexpected voice from the castle entrance. Rollan limped out of the gate, brushing past Lenori.

"Rollan!" Abeke called.

"Ask him about his wolverine!" Rollan cried, his dagger out. Essix lashed in from above, shrieking in anger.

"What are you talking about?" Abeke asked.

Shane looked up, eyes wide. "What did you just say?"

"Your spirit animal is a wolverine, right?" Rollan said. "We fought it before. And yet we saw one that looked just like it in Nilo. Dead. Guess who we found it with?"

Shane crossed his arms, his features stony. "I don't know what you mean. You *saw* Renneg and me together during the Arax battle."

Rollan limped across the courtyard toward Shane, his dagger at the ready. "It's no fun being separated from your spirit animal for long periods of time. Conor and I know that very well, after what we had to do to reach Cabaro. It must have been hard for Gar to send his wolverine with you in the past. So hard he decided to skip that step in Nilo. But, see, that's where you messed up. Because Gar died, and we found your wolverine with him. And his crocodile was nowhere in sight." Rollan stopped a few feet shy of Shane, his dagger pointed at the boy's chest. "Come over to us, Abeke, so we can deal with Shane."

Conor held out his hands to block Rollan in case he lunged. "I think there's an easy way to resolve this. Shane, bring forth your spirit animal, and that will

settle it.”

Shane shook his head. “If you’re not going to trust me now, you never will. I thought Abeke was your friend. Why doesn’t her word matter to you?”

Conor watched Abeke’s expression go from defiance to confusion. She turned to Shane and placed a hand lightly on his forearm. “Just do it, please. Summon Renneg. Then Rollan will see there’s nothing to worry about.”

Shane bit his lip. “Are you saying that you don’t trust me either, Abeke, after all that we’ve been through?”

Abeke’s gaze hardened. “Do it for me.”

Rollan stepped to one side so he flanked Shane. “Summon Briggan,” he called to Conor.

Heart racing with indefinable danger, Conor brought the wolf forward. Briggan sat on his haunches beside him, nose in the air and eyes alert. His wounds were healed over, gray fur patchy wherever there were scabs beneath.

“I will summon Uraza now,” Abeke said defiantly. “Unless you give us a reason not to fight, Shane.”

“Fine,” Shane said. “I’ll give you a reason not to fight.” Hands trembling, Shane slowly undid the two lengths of leather that kept his tunic closed. The fabric parted at the top. He tugged the leather free and ran a hand under his shirt. The tunic parted farther, exposing the breadth of his chest.

And an animal tattoo.

SHANE

ABEKE STEPPED BACK, ASTONISHED. THE TATTOO OF A giant beast stretched across Shane's chest, riding the hollow of his rib cage. Its tail whipped around his flat belly, the beast's open jaw in an embrace around the nape of Shane's neck.

A giant crocodile.

It didn't make any sense. Why would Shane have a crocodile tattooed on his chest? His spirit animal was a *wolverine*. The crocodile was the spirit animal of the Devourer.

The Devourer ...

Rollan advanced on Shane, his long dagger outstretched.

Shane turned to face Abeke, his expression unreadable. Then he thrust his bare chest toward the sky.

The giant crocodile burst into the small space, shooting forward from Shane's body. In two quick strides Shane was atop it. His strong legs clenched the sides of the giant reptile easily, like he'd been doing it all his life. A memory flashed into Abeke's mind, of an armored man, spiked helmet over his features, astride a giant crocodile at the battle of Dinesh's temple. She'd assumed it was Gar. But was that ... Shane?

"It was you," Abeke said, even though Shane was already halfway across the courtyard. "*You* are the Devourer, not Gar!"

Shane didn't waste time answering. He and the crocodile were racing toward the gate of Greenhaven. With no reason to expect an attack, the Greencloaks had left it wide open.

"Stop him!" Conor cried out.

They'd all been caught unawares. Briggan started sprinting, but the crocodile had too much of a head start.

Only Lenori stood in its way.

She struggled to fit a dart into her blowgun. Her rainbow ibis stood beside her, but it was a creature suited to divination, not combat. Lenori shouted for help as she fumbled with her weapon, only to fall to one side as the sprinting crocodile bowled her over.

The Greencloaks in the great hall must have heard the clamor. The first few had just begun to arrive when Shane reached the open gate. He turned the crocodile agilely, the beast whipping its great tail in an arc. Four Greencloaks slammed into the wall and crumpled to the ground. Shane charged in, and within a moment he and the reptile had disappeared inside. The last thing Abeke saw was the tip of its armored tail sliding through the door.

She was stunned. "I'm so sorry," she cried to Conor and Rollan.

"Don't be sorry!" Rollan yelled. "Just run!" He and Essix took off after Shane, soon followed by Conor and Briggan. Snapping into action, Abeke peeled after them.

There was no time to let their eyes adjust to the dim corridors of Greenhaven, and the moment she was inside Abeke was tripping over fallen Greencloaks and spirit animals. She got to her feet and staggered through the darkness, following the shouts of her companions. She could hear a vast commotion from the great hall, screams and loud crashes that she assumed were from the crocodile's tail striking the wall.

"The talismans!" she heard Conor shout from around a bend in the hallway. "Shane's after the talismans!"

Of course. Shane — the Devourer — needed the talismans to free Kovo. And Abeke had brought him right to them, slipping him in past Greenhaven's defenses. Her shattering guilt nearly brought her to her knees. But she wouldn't let herself collapse — the best thing she could do now was stop the plot she'd

helped put in motion.

As she neared the daylight great hall, Abeke began to make out more details in the hallway. The walls were strewn with the Greencloaks Shane had knocked over during his charge. They slumped, dazed. A brown bear spirit animal was hunched over, cradling what looked like a broken foreleg. Abeke snatched a discarded bow and clenched it in her grasp. Farther along she came across a quiver of crossbow quarrels — not ideal, but they'd fire.

The great hall was in disarray. The charging crocodile had smashed benches in its path and shattered the dais. Tarik's ceremonial sarcophagus had pitched forward from its altar, the lid half-off. Crying out from astride the crocodile, Shane faced off against Olvan. The elder Greencloak was feinting with his heavy quarterstaff, but the snapping jaws of the crocodile kept him from connecting with Shane. His moose stood defiantly behind him, but the beast's massive antlers blocked it from getting around the sarcophagus to Olvan's aid.

"Uraza, help me!" Abeke screamed, and in a flash the leopard was at her side. Abeke took heart at the sight of her companion, who, after only a moment's hesitation to take in the scene, slinked forward across the hall. Tail low and ears flattened against her head, Uraza silently maneuvered so she was behind the crocodile.

Olvan threw his body in front of the talismans decorating Tarik's sarcophagus. Taking advantage of the distraction, Rollan managed to reach the crocodile's powerful, whipping tail. With Essix on his shoulder, beating her wings to give the boy extra lift, he lunged forward with his dagger and sank it between two scales on the reptile. When the crocodile whirled to see what had happened, Essix blocked its vision, flapping and pecking.

Rollan jumped higher on the beast's back and sank his dagger in again. He wasn't doing much damage, but he was slowly making his way up the thrashing body, toward Shane.

Briggan, meanwhile, had reached Olvan and his moose. Soon joined by Conor, the four faced off against the crocodile. Essix's distraction was just enough to keep them alive — the crocodile's snapping jaws missed them each time it lunged.

With Rollan nearing Shane from behind, and three capable warriors facing

him from the front, Abeke began to take hope. Every second that went by, Shane was benefitting less from the initial surprise of his attack. Abeke could see some of the Greencloaks and spirit animals that had been cast against the walls now staggering to their feet. Reinforcements were coming.

Abeke nocked a quarrel to her bowstring and took aim. Tears of fury clouded her vision, threatening the shot. Shane was bouncing so quickly astride the attacking crocodile, she'd be lucky to get the bolt to connect.

Nonetheless, Abeke steadied herself and prepared to fire.

Until Rollan lunged upward, thrusting his dagger at the crocodile and bringing himself into the shot.

Abeke cursed. She lowered the bow and stole around to the crocodile's flank. With the disadvantage of coming in from below, Rollan was probably hoping to knock Shane off his mount. And since Rollan's sword arm was his right, Abeke thought she had a good idea where Shane would fall.

She and Uraza would be waiting.

Somehow, Rollan got to his feet astride the crocodile, crouched low and balancing, like he was surfing the bucking beast. Abeke was impressed — when had he become such a capable fighter? Maybe he could take Shane down in one strike. Still, Abeke readied the bowstring again, drew it back so her thumb was tight against her cheek. Whether from Rollan's strike, Uraza's bite, or Abeke's quarrel, this battle would be over soon.

And then the room went black.

Abeke lowered the bow in confusion, blinking her eyes. What was happening?

The sunlight returned, then it vanished again. Astonished, Abeke looked up to the circle of sky, flickering at the ceiling of the hall. An absolutely enormous creature was hovering in the open space, at moments blocking it entirely and eclipsing the sun. Then it lowered, and Abeke realized she was seeing some kind of giant bird.

In the eerie flashing darkness, the room went still. Shane, Greencloaks, and spirit animals all froze, staring up at the massive bird. It had a sharp, noble prow and hooked beak, and with a start, Abeke realized what she was seeing: Halawir the Eagle. He was enormous — whenever he flapped, Halawir's wingtips grazed

opposite walls of the massive hall.

It took a few moments for the gusting of Halawir's wingbeats to make its way down to the floor. The moment it did, Abeke was off her feet. The wind was so fierce that it sounded like the air itself was panicked and screaming. The squall blew her toward the wall, and out of the corner of her eye she saw even large Briggan lose his footing under the blast of wind, despite how ferociously his claws dug into the stone floor. Abeke could see Conor shouting where he was pinned against the wall, but she couldn't hear a word of it.

Only the giant crocodile was massive enough to resist the blasting wind as Halawir descended. Shane pressed himself flat on its back, gripping the reptile's scales as his body shuddered under the gusts. Poor Uraza tried to take shelter against the crocodile's side, but finally lost her grip, claws leaving great gouges in the stone floor as she skittered across and came to rest on her side between a bench and the wall.

Abeke wanted to look away, her eyes tearing and screaming under the wind. But she forced herself to watch.

Once he was near the floor, Halawir folded his great wings and landed. The giant eagle, handsome with gray-blue plumage, stared at Shane with black and emotionless eyes. His beak was at least two feet long, and curved down into a sharp point. One strike with it would end anyone.

Abeke got to her feet and saw the others and their spirit animals do the same. Essix shrieked, and Halawir cocked his head toward her, listening. Then the eagle turned his attention back to Shane.

Abeke expected Shane to shrink away in fear, but he was unperturbed. He tapped his chest, and the crocodile disappeared into dormant form. Rollan plummeted to the floor, striking it with a loud thud, but Halawir caught Shane in his beak before he fell, and set him gently on his feet.

Why would Halawir do that?

Halawir was supposed to be guarding Kovo's prison. Why was he here? And why would he catch Shane to prevent him from falling?

The answer was obvious, and felt impossible.

Halawir was on Shane's side.

Without pausing, Shane lunged for the talismans decorating the end of

Tarik's sarcophagus. As soon as he had their ribbons under his fingers, he lifted them into the air victoriously.

Uraza was the first one to arrive. A frenzied blur of yellow, she leaped for Shane. But before she could get her jaws around Shane's thigh, Halawir had unfurled his wings again and beat them once, sending the leopard skittering across the hall under the roaring wind.

All Abeke could do was watch, numb.

Shane was knocked off his feet too, but managed to keep his grip on the talismans. Halawir dexterously lashed out with one foot and caught the boy's waist in his talons. Then the other foot was around Shane's torso, cradling his body tightly, and with a victorious shriek Halawir beat his wings, rising into the air.

Abeke could barely muster the strength to face into the eagle's powerful thrusts, but she forced herself. She let loose a quarrel, but it shuddered and stilled in the screaming typhoon wind, clattering to the ground. Gritting her teeth, Abeke struggled to fit another quarrel to the bowstring. She saw Halawir give one mighty thrust and then furl his wings, shooting up out of the great hall. The Great Beast disappeared into the sky, along with Shane.

And the talismans.

Essix tried to launch after Halawir, but the falcon must have been wounded in the fight. She managed to get a dozen feet into the air, but then had to come back to the ground, one wing dragging.

There was a long stretch filled only with the moans of wounded Greencloaks and the cries of their spirit animals. Then, slowly, the surviving Greencloaks got to their feet. Olvan was bleeding from a blow to the head, and brought his moose back to passive form rather than have him suffer with a broken ankle. Uraza limped, one paw held tenderly in the air. Briggan shook his head, as if to clear it of some pain inside. Conor clutched his neck. Rollan was stunned, staring down at the dagger that so recently had been lodged in the giant crocodile's hide. Then he looked over at Abeke.

She'd never seen an expression of such defeat. Even now, after the shock of Halawir's rapid entrance and betrayal, she knew that it was all her fault.

Abeke put her face into her hands.

Olvan was the first to speak. “Halawir has betrayed us. That means we must fear the worst: Kovo is free, or soon will be.”

And Abeke, Abeke thought. I betrayed you as well. If it weren't for me, none of this would have happened.

Olvan had never been one to dwell on losses, instead always pointing them toward the next fight. But tears were pooling in the elder Greencloak's eyes. Abeke had never seen him anywhere close to crying. The sight of it set her own heart breaking.

“That's it,” Olvan said. “The Conquerors have all our talismans. Nothing can stop them now.”

AFTERMATH

BACK WHEN HE'D BEEN NO MORE THAN A SHEPHERD BOY tending his family's flock, Conor used to sit on a ruined wall in the meadow near his home, spending his moments of boredom turning over stones and seeing what lay beneath. This night was like the underside of one of those misty meadow stones: moist, deep gray, craggy.

He and Abeke stood at the parapets of Greenhaven Castle, staring out over the darkened shoreline. Moonlight played on distant wave caps — somewhere out there Shane's boat was still moored, derelict. He had no need of it, not with Halawir to carry him away. The battle had taken place that morning; the Devourer was long gone by now.

Conor massaged the spot where his neck met his skull. His head was still throbbing from being knocked hard against the flagstones of the great hall. Abeke noticed Conor rubbing his head and sighed, staring glumly into the night. She'd spent the afternoon and early evening apologizing. Clearly she was sick of her own voice.

"It could have all gone worse, you know," Conor said. When she didn't respond, he continued, "I mean, the ground could have turned into molten lava or something."

Abeke smiled, but there was no joy in it. Her eyes looked red and tired from

crying.

“From what you’ve told me,” Conor said, “it sounds like you were a huge help to Meilin. After everything that happened in Oceanus ... it was big of you.”

Abeke sighed. “She’s my friend. I had no option but to love her, whatever she did.”

“Exactly. I guess all I’m trying to say is that there are worse things than trusting people, you know? Shane tricked you, but that’s about him — not you. Your heart isn’t hard, and I count that as a good thing.”

“You’re being nice to me. I don’t deserve that.”

“Shane tricked all of us, Abeke. He brought Gar’s wolverine with him that first time we fought Arax, and again at Dinesh’s temple. And Gar meant for the Greencloaks to believe that he was the real Devourer. If he hadn’t died, we would never have realized that the wolverine was actually *his* spirit animal. Gerathon probably killed Drina in front of you precisely to get you to trust that Shane had a good reason to leave the Conquerors. We all fell for it. All of us. Not just you.”

Abeke remained silent, her face impassive. Conor picked a stray pebble on the battlement and pitched it into the night. “Of course, if you want to wallow, please wallow away. Don’t let me stop you.”

“Thank you,” Abeke said. Then she gave a long, gutturing sigh. “Thank you for telling me about my family too.”

“I’m sorry,” Conor said. “I really am. I feel like you and I have always put a lot of faith in our families, and yours ... It can’t have been easy growing up alongside people who didn’t value you. It made me so angry, Abeke. For your sake.”

Abeke shut her eyes for a long moment. “I can understand why you’re angry, but Pojalo is still my father. It’s hard for me to feel mad at him. All I feel is confused. But if there’s one thing I’m coming to realize, it’s that some bonds aren’t unconditional. Sometimes the family you find can be better for you than the one you grew up trusting.”

Conor slid closer and gently put his arm around Abeke’s shoulder. “I think of you as family too,” he said.

The torchlight flickered, and Conor turned to see Uraza standing in the

doorway, her fur spotted orange in the ruddy fire glow. Abeke's back straightened.

"What is it?" Conor whispered.

"I think someone's in the great hall," Abeke answered. And then, noiselessly, she and Uraza were off.

Conor struggled to keep up, his booted feet clomping as he bolted after the silent pair. Briggan joined him on the way, and the four were soon standing at the entrance to the great hall.

Abeke held a finger to her lips and eased the door open, wincing when the hinges creaked. They crept into the cavernous space as quietly as they could, two humans and two animals, all alert.

A cloaked figure leaned into Tarik's ceremonial sarcophagus, trying to climb inside, one foot on its carved edge. Conor had his ax on him — no way was he going to let it leave his side after the day's events — and quietly eased it from his belt.

Abeke had her bow out and nocked an arrow. While Uraza stole forward, she drew back the string.

At the sound of the creaking catgut, the figure whirled to face them. Abeke's fingers trembled, and the surprise of seeing Rollan's face made her let go of the string. She fell as she did, sending the arrow flying safely into the sky.

Rollan had a hand over his mouth, shocked at how close he'd come to death. Then his face shifted into its usual mocking smile. "Don't you think you have enough to feel guilty about without killing me too?"

"What are you *thinking*, sneaking around like that?" Abeke hollered, leaping to her feet. "When we're all on edge ... I could have killed you!"

"Not with aim like that, you couldn't."

Briggan whined, and Conor shook his head. "Enough, guys."

"I thought you went to bed right after dinner," Abeke said.

"I did go to bed," Rollan said. "And then I got right back out. You think I could sleep after a day like today? Come on over, and I'll show you what I was doing."

"What's got you in such a good mood?" Conor asked as he approached. His hand shook with nerves as he placed the ax back into his belt.

“After everything that happened today, I wasn’t sure who we could trust. I didn’t want to do this in front of everyone, but I have complete faith in you two, of course. Give me a boost and I’ll show you.”

Conor held out two interlaced hands, and Rollan placed his foot in them. After Conor had boosted him up, Rollan clutched the edge of the sarcophagus. Leaning in deep, he fished around.

“What are you *doing*?” Abeke asked.

Finally Rollan emerged and leaped back to the floor. He lifted his hand into the air. Two items dangled from it, clattering together.

The Granite Ram of Arax. The Coral Octopus of Mulop.

“We still have two of the talismans!” Conor said, clapping in joy.

“So all’s not lost,” Abeke breathed. She threw her arms around Rollan. “You’re amazing!”

“That’s what I keep trying to tell you guys,” Rollan said with a grin.

“Just think!” Abeke said. “We still have a chance. If we can manage to protect these two talismans, the Devourer can’t complete his plan.”

“Nilo and Zhong are overrun,” Rollan said, sighing ruefully. “Kovo will be out of his prison soon, if what Mulop told us is true. Halawir is a traitor, and the Devourer — the real Devourer — has twelve talismans. Even if Tellun himself bounded in here with party hats, I’m not sure there would be any reason to celebrate.”

“I don’t care,” Abeke said. “Seeing those has me feeling good for the first time today.”

Conor looked at the two talismans in Rollan’s hands. They were such small things, and yet essential to the very fate of the world. The moonlight streaming in iced their edges, its gleam reflecting in his friends’ eyes.

He put one arm around Rollan and another around Abeke. Together, they stared through the open ceiling of the great hall into the night sky, where a splash of stars winked through the clouds.

To Conor, they almost looked like an arrow pointing the way south, to Stetriol. The Conquerors’ home.

“We have two talismans,” he said. “And we know who has the rest. So let’s get moving.”

Eliot Schrefer is the National Book Award finalist author of *Endangered*, about a girl surviving wartime in Congo with an orphaned ape. His research for his Great Ape Quartet books has led him to a bonobo sanctuary in the Democratic Republic of Congo and on a boat trek through the jungles of Borneo. He once worked as a sea turtle research assistant and had many fish while growing up, of which only the catfish survived.

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SLEEPWALKING

IT WAS A COLD, DRIZZLY MORNING AT GREENHAVEN CASTLE. Rollan wrapped his cloak — *Tarik's* old green cloak, rather — more tightly around his shoulders and wandered out to the main entrance, where he'd seen Abeke surveying the overcast landscape with Uraza at her side. The Coral Octopus hung heavily around his neck, bumping against his chest with every step he took. He found himself reaching up frequently to touch it. After all that had happened — Shane's betrayal, Meilin's turning, *Tarik's* death — he couldn't afford to lose one of their two remaining talismans.

How long had it been since Shane escaped with the talismans? A few weeks? Somehow, the whole thing felt like it'd happened yesterday. And here they were, still gathering Greencloaks from around the world, building up their forces to face the Conquerors. Rollan's mouth tightened in frustration. If *Tarik* were here, he would tell Rollan not to worry, to calm down and think clearly, to let himself grieve and then move forward with a clear, patient head. But all Rollan could do these days was pace restlessly in the castle, waiting for the word that they could head out to retrieve the talismans, stop Kovo the Ape, and rescue Meilin.

And rescue Meilin.

His fingers stopped fiddling with the Coral Octopus for a moment, suspended by the weight of the thought. Rescuing her felt impossible. Sometimes, when he chatted with the others, he found himself looking for

Meilin so that he could tell her the newest joke in his head. He would yearn to make her laugh, only to realize that she wasn't there. She was far away.

Rollan sighed. He couldn't afford to keep thinking about all that had gone wrong. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to pretend that Tarik was still wandering around somewhere in the castle, that Meilin was asleep in her chambers upstairs. He knew neither was true, but right now, he could force himself to believe, and it kept his darker thoughts at bay.

The weather. That was a much safer thought. *I'll think about the weather.*

For the fifteenth time that morning, Rollan considered how odd the weather had been. This was supposed to be the dry season, but for the past week, as Olvan organized their forces in preparation to leave, they'd gotten nothing but gray skies and steady rain. Even the animals were behaving oddly all of a sudden. The birds were migrating early, for one, and when Rollan looked overhead, he could see another flock heading south in two giant V formations.

"Go ahead, Essix," he murmured to his gyrfalcon, who sat perched on his shoulder. If she kept putting her full weight on him like this, he was going to get a sore back for sure. "I know you want to hunt."

But even Essix seemed out of sorts. She chirped a little, fluffed her neck feathers to shake out water droplets, and settled in even more. She seemed completely content to stay put, instead of heading out for a good hunt. Rollan watched her for a while. When she just went back to preening her tail feathers, he tried to ignore his aching shoulder and decided he'd better leave her be. Far be it from him to judge her sullen mood.

Maybe she loathed waiting around just as much as Rollan did.

By the time he reached the castle entrance, the drizzle had turned into a steady rain. The water beaded on the fabric of his cloak before soaking through. Uraza watched them approach. Her tail swished back and forth. Even though she wasn't his spirit animal, Rollan guessed she probably felt a little impatient with all the waiting too.

Abeke stood beside her, leaning against the archway and absently stroking the leopard's velvety head. She didn't bother turning when Rollan came to join her. The Granite Ram, their only other talisman, dangled from her neck, the pale gray pendant prominent against the dark of her skin.

“Hey,” Rollan said. “I know you were supposed to be your village’s Rain Dancer and all, but can you lighten up on all the dancing?” He looked up at the sky for emphasis.

Abeke’s eyes flickered to Rollan’s cloak, then went back to surveying the bleak landscape. She didn’t seem amused by his joke, and in embarrassment, he let it fade away. “Hey,” she just said.

Rollan turned serious. “Olvan says we should be able to set out soon, in the next few days.”

“Any new messages?”

He shook his head. They’d sent out dozens of stormy petrels and pigeons to their Greencloak allies and friends in other nations, hoping that some of them would receive the call for help in time to come to their aid. Abeke had sent several doves to Nilo, to deliver the news to her father and sister.

Friends — we make for Stetriol in a week. We need your help.

As far as Rollan knew, Abeke’s father hadn’t responded.

“Sorry,” he replied.

Abeke nodded her thanks, lowered her eyes, and turned away again.

Rollan pursed his lips, for once lacking a witty quip. Where was a good joke when you needed one? Abeke had been like this often lately, staring off at the horizon while lost in thought. He knew she was probably dwelling on Shane’s betrayal, and how Meilin had been forced to turn on all of them. And by the way she lowered her eyes in shame, he knew she still blamed herself for all of it.

Meilin. Again, Rollan scolded himself for returning to the thoughts that kept him tossing at night and pushing away his meals. *Where is she now?* he wondered. What was she thinking?

What must it feel like, to have no power over yourself?

The pain of losing Meilin irritated him for an instant. He’d done so well, for so long, on his own. But now there were people at stake, whose absences hurt him, and he didn’t like it one bit.

As if she could tell what he was thinking, Abeke tilted her head toward him and cleared her throat. “It looks good on you,” she said, offering him a weak smile.

Tarik’s cloak. Memories flashed back to him of the elder Greencloak’s last

stand, of the hopeful look in Tarik's eyes when he saw his own cloak draped in Rollan's arms, just before he sacrificed himself. A pain spread in Rollan's chest, until he felt like he could barely breathe.

Still, there was something comforting about Abeke's words. As if Tarik wasn't completely gone. Even now, the cloak protected him, shielding him from the rain. Essix ruffled her feathers again, and flecks of water went flying.

"Thanks," he muttered. "Who knew I'd have to wrap myself up to keep warm at this time of year?"

"Olvan says the Greencloaks in Nilo are reporting weird weather there too."

"Like what?"

"Like layers of ice over the watering holes. He said some of the animals don't know what to make of it, and they can't get to the water."

Ice. In Nilo? Rollan tried to imagine the oasis where they'd found Cabaro, encased in a thick layer of ice. "Well. *That* sounds like a nice, normal summer."

Abeke couldn't help smiling a little at his sarcasm. "I can't remember seeing that — or even hearing about it — when I lived in Nilo. The tribes must be in chaos."

"Or skating around and playing games. I mean, *I* would."

That coaxed a genuine laugh out of her. "I can see it. Planks of wood and antelope bone strapped to our feet."

Rollan leaned in with a conspiratorial grin. "I bet Uraza would love that. Wouldn't you?" He nodded at Uraza, who regarded him with a rather withering look.

The two chuckled a little, and then their moment of humor faded.

Rollan realized that Abeke must be wondering how her father and sister were doing. He shifted his boots against the damp stone floor. "Do you think they're okay?" he asked.

Abeke shrugged. For a moment, she threw her shoulders back in an illusion of confidence. "I haven't thought much about it," she said, almost too careful about her carelessness.

The lie in her words and posture was so obvious that Rollan could have sensed it even without his gifts from Essix. Still, he just nodded along. He had lost his mentor, the only man he'd ever thought of as a father ... but Abeke's

true father had turned his back on her. And the person Abeke had always considered a good friend — Shane — had used her friendship too.

“Abeke,” Rollan suddenly said, touching her arm with his hand. She and Uraza both turned to look at him in unison. “Look. I know what you must be going through. You don’t have to pretend around me.” He hesitated. He’d never been all that good at gestures of serious emotion. “It’s not your fault,” he finally said. “Shane’s betrayal ... He’s the one who should feel guilty, not you. You couldn’t have known. You love and you trust. And I just wanted to say ... well, that I’m sorry people keep taking advantage of that trust.”

Abeke studied him for a long moment. She still looked sad, but Rollan thought he could see some of the guilt lift from her eyes. After a while, she nodded. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I’m sorry that you’ve had to wait so long to trust others,” she replied.

The two fell into a comfortable silence. After a while, Rollan shook his head and nudged her gently. “The ice will pass, I know it. All I can say is that I’d be mad if Nilo was hogging all the blue sky and sunshine.”

Abeke cracked a wry smile. Uraza let out a comforting rumble deep in her throat, then nudged the girl’s hand with her head.

Suddenly Rollan felt Essix’s weight shift on his shoulder. An instant later, she pushed off from him and launched herself into the air with an earsplitting shriek. The movement nearly sent him tumbling backward. He flinched, his ears ringing, and looked on as she soared up into the sky. “Hey!” he shouted up at her, annoyed. “I know you’re loud — you don’t have to show off!”

“What is she doing?” asked Abeke.

“I don’t know. Probably decided she was hungry after all.” But the migrating birds were too far off in the distance now. Something else must have caught her attention. Rollan looked at Essix as she flew farther away —

— and then, abruptly, the world rushed forward around him, and he could see through her eyes.

He soared up, up, above the castle and into the open air, and then he looked down at where their small figures stood at the entrance. Essix’s gaze turned sharply to focus on one of the castle’s battlements. She shrieked again. This time, it was the distinct cry of something going very, very wrong.

Rollan looked closer. There, along the slippery, wet edge of the battlement's stone barrier, walked *Conor*.

Conor didn't walk in a concentrated way. He swayed and teetered dangerously along the ledge, as if he wasn't quite awake. The hairs rose on the back of Rollan's neck. *What on Erdas is he doing up there?* Rollan blinked, feeling his vision rush back to the ground and return to him. He pointed up in horror.

"Is that *Conor*?" he said incredulously.

"What?" Abeke exclaimed. She looked too. Immediately she straightened, then squinted as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing either. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "*Conor!*" she shouted up at the battlement. "Hey, *Conor!*"

But *Conor* didn't seem to hear her. He didn't seem to notice anything, actually, not even the fact that he was now inching his way along the edge of the battlement. Where was *Briggan*? Rollan glanced frantically around the top of the tower, but the enormous gray wolf was nowhere to be seen. *Briggan* must have been in his passive state.

A chill ran down Rollan's spine as he thought back to *Meilin*'s strange, *Bile*-addled behavior. *What if Conor was somehow affected by the Bile too?* Rollan felt a sudden urge to call out for *Tarik* — until he remembered, with a pang, that *Tarik* was no longer there to help them.

"Come on!" he hissed at Abeke, grabbing her hand. He dashed through the entrance, back into the castle, and toward the stairs leading up to the battlement. They ran up the steps two at a time. Rollan almost tripped on one step, but caught himself and hurried on. *Uraza* bounded beside them, each of her strides equal to three of theirs.

By the time they emerged at the top of the wet battlement, *Uraza* was already there. Rollan wiped rain out of his eyes, and his gaze settled on *Conor*'s teetering figure.

No!

Essix shrieked again and dove for the boy. Rollan lunged forward as fast as he could.

He reached *Conor* — right as *Conor* slipped off the edge.

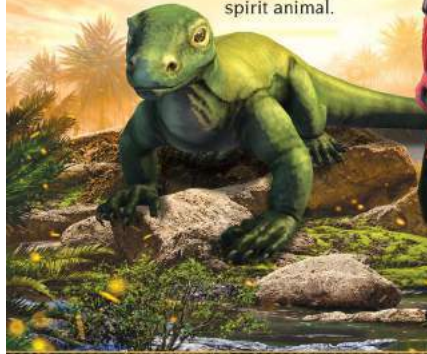
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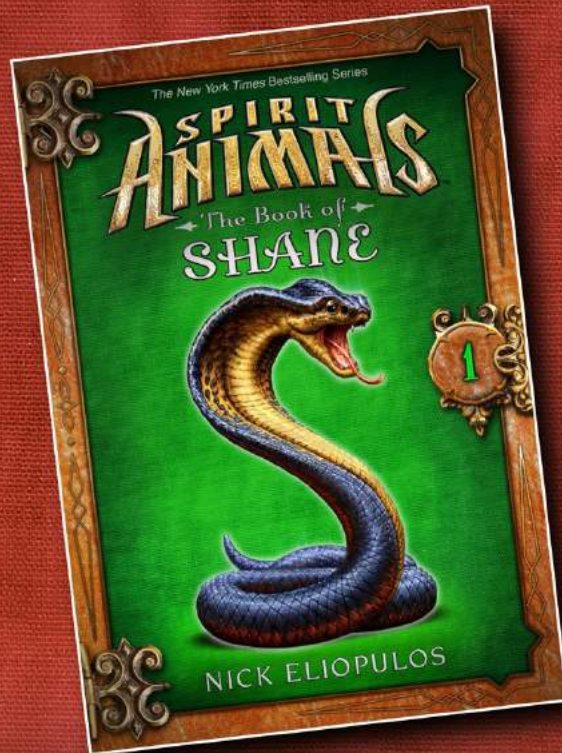


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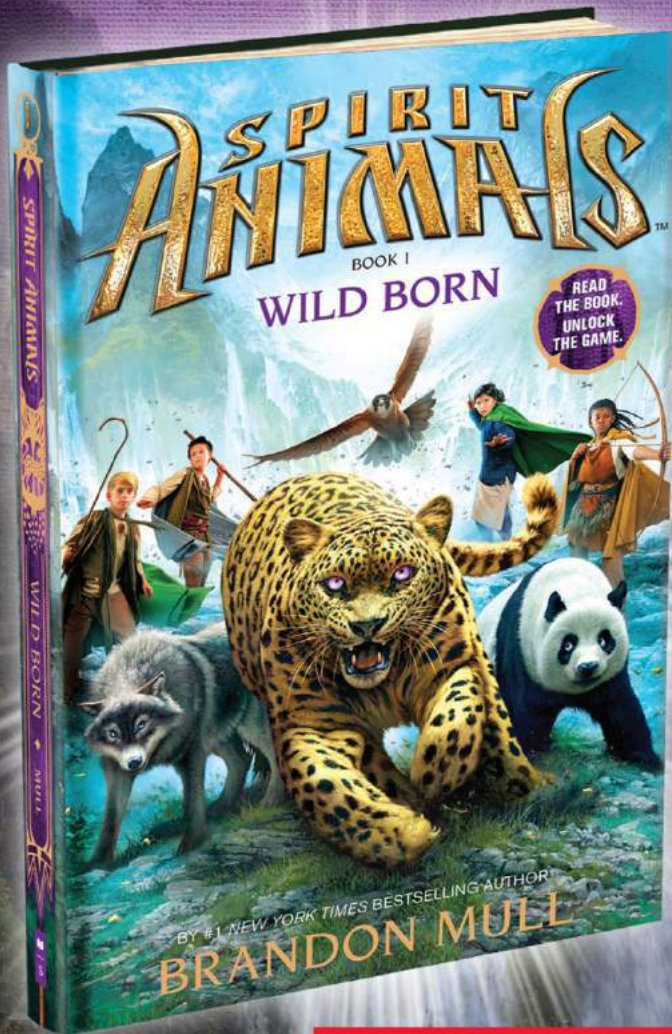
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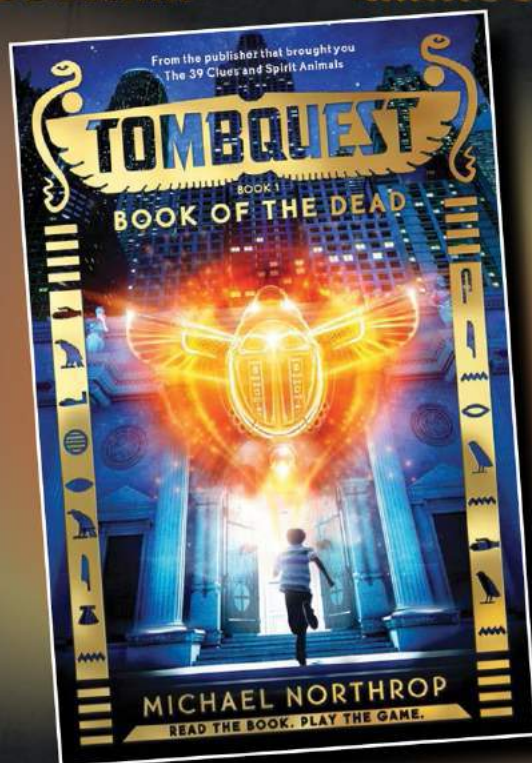
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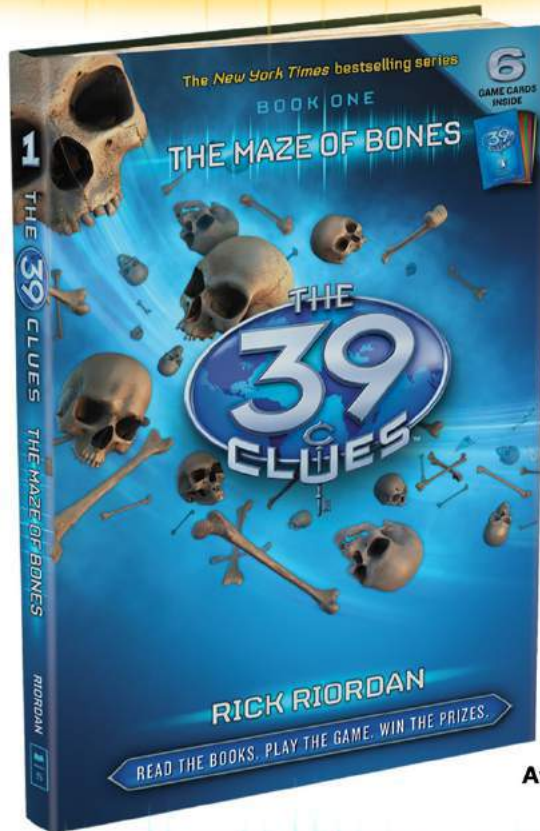
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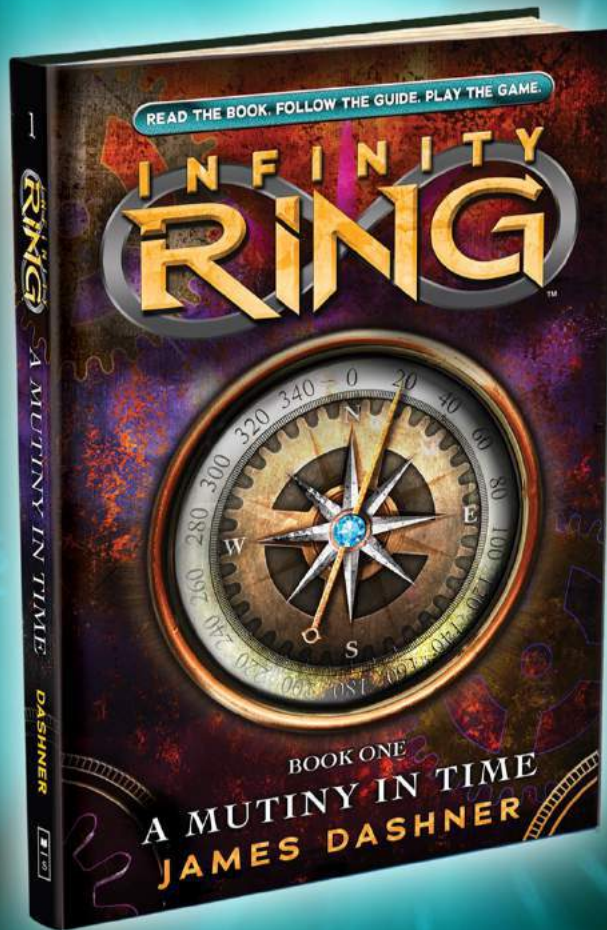


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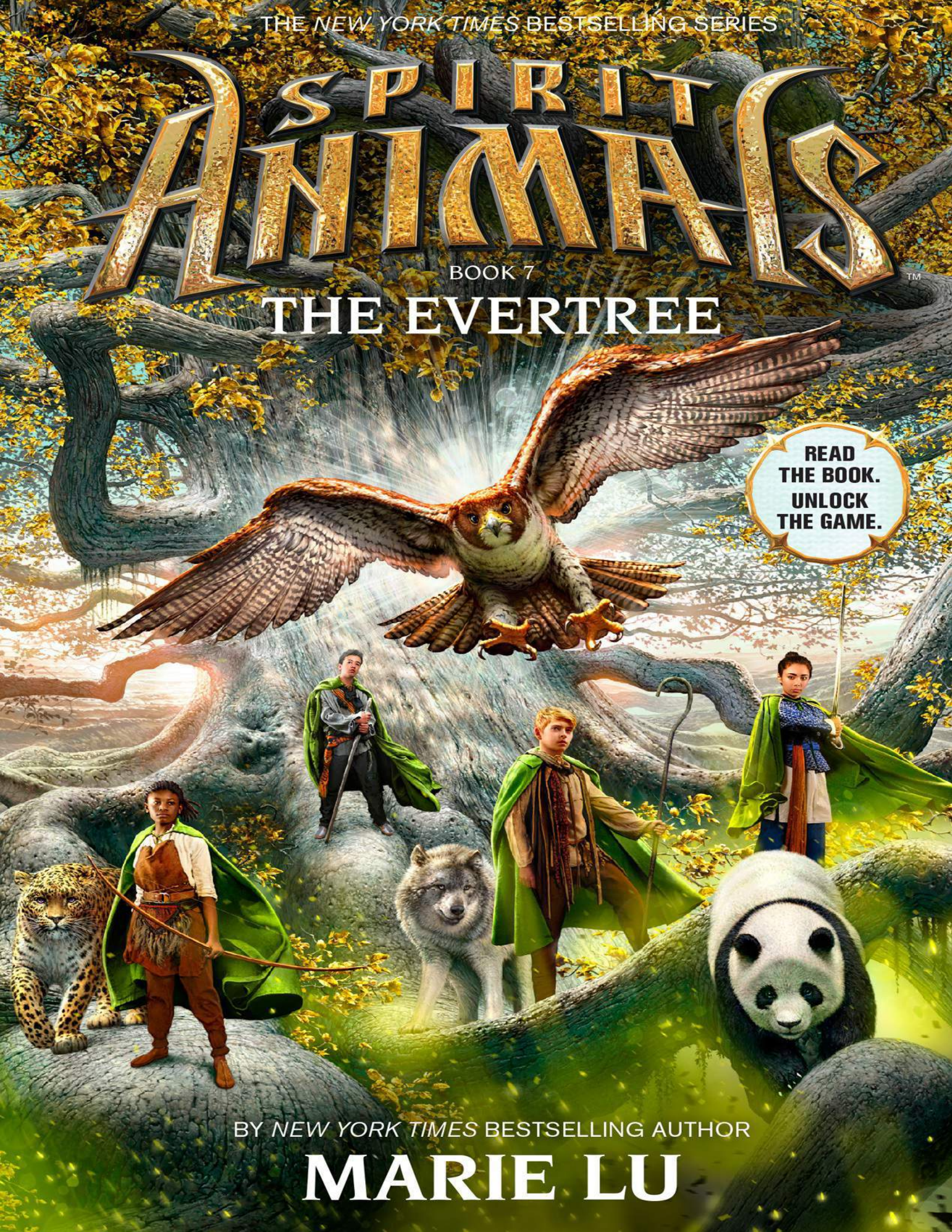
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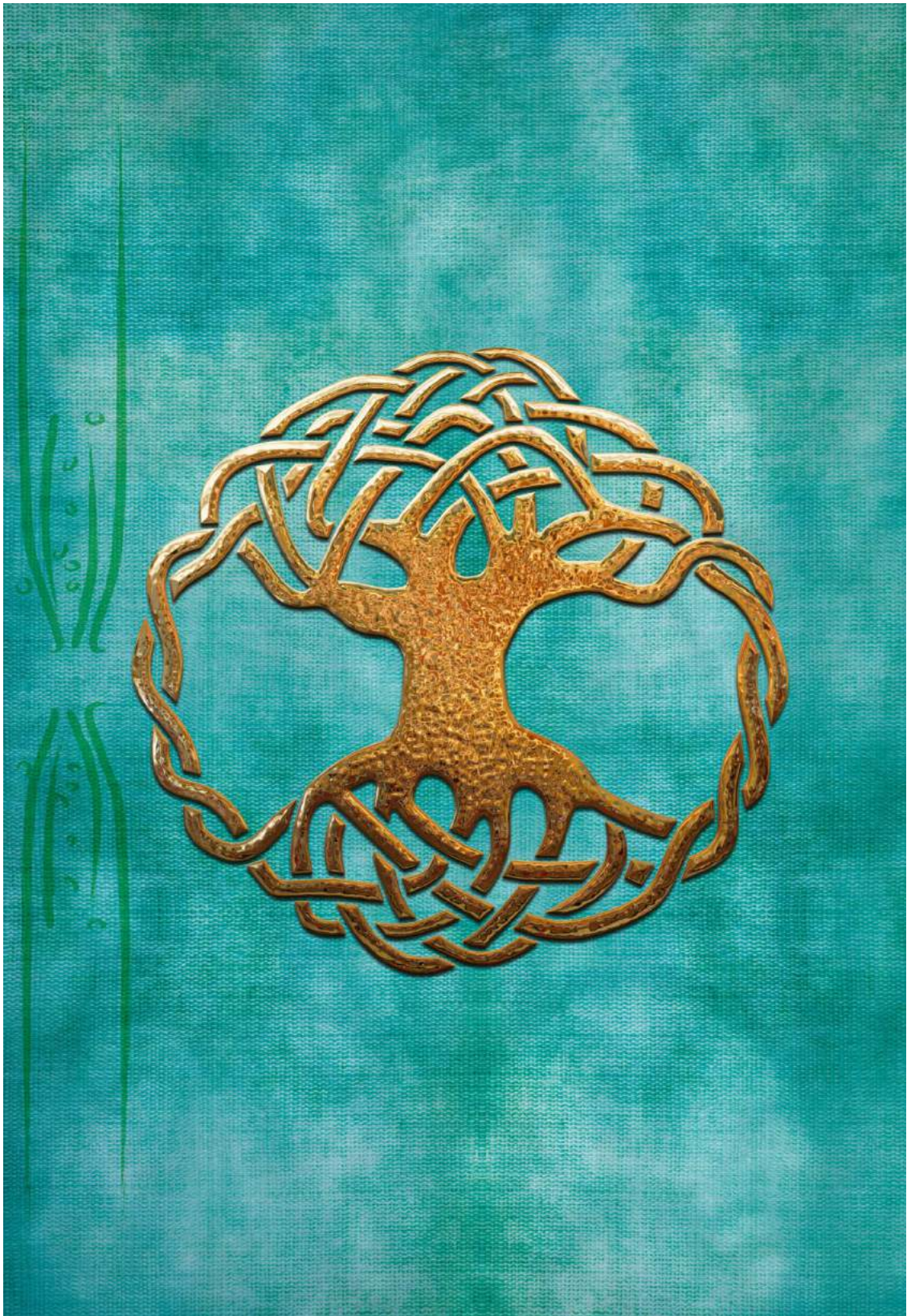
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It shimmered under the dark
sky, glowing as if from within,
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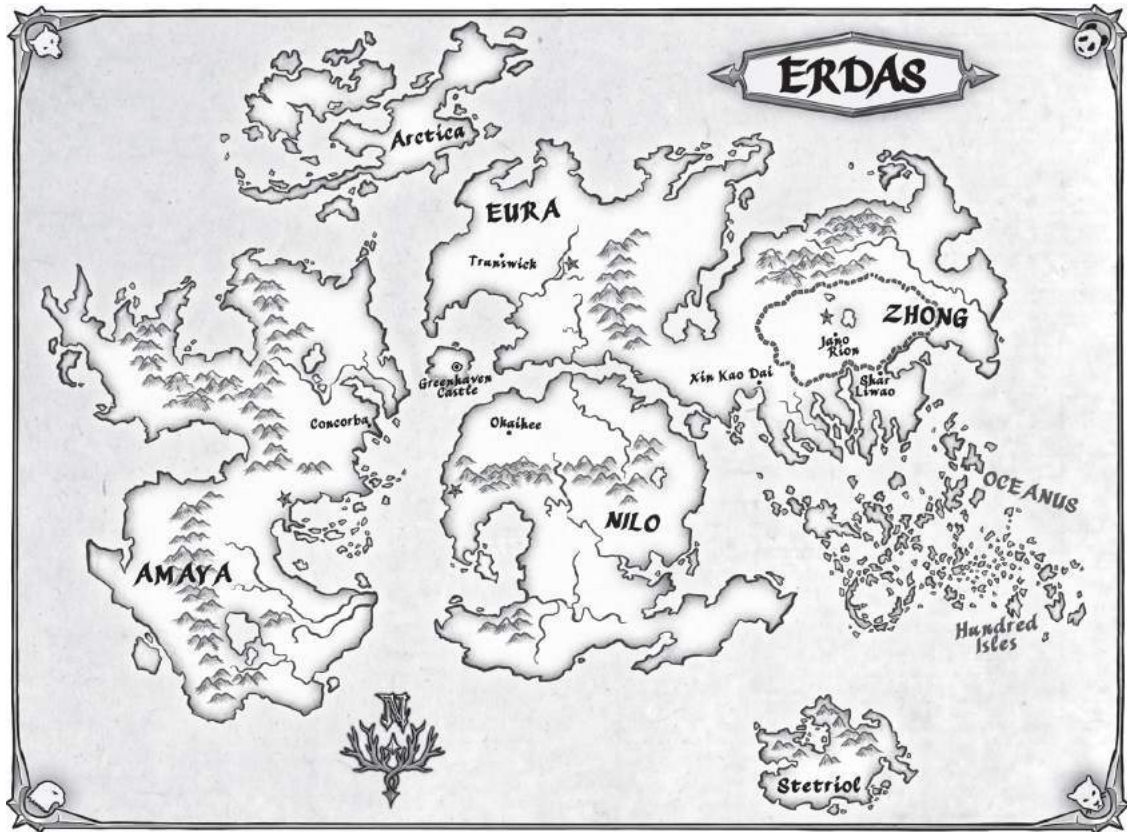
ASPIRIT ANIMAS™

THE EVERTREE

Marie Lu



SCHOLASTIC INC.



To Taylor, who loves beasts great and small

–M.L.



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1

VISION

ENORMOUS BLACK SCALES SLITHERING ACROSS GRASS. A gorilla’s earthshaking roar. A piercing shriek from the sky. Grass, dirt, rock, brittle bark. A heartbeat deep in the earth, something as old as time itself. A silhouette of twisting antlers that appeared and then vanished.

The dream always began this way. Conor blinked, blinded by the light overhead. He held his hand out over his eyes in an attempt to block it, but the light cut through, turning the edges of his skin red and translucent. Something gold flashed before his eyes. It vanished immediately, but for that instant, it had looked like leaves. He struggled to a sitting position. The dirt beneath him crumbled, hard and cracked, dying.

A voice echoed in the air.

Conor. It is the end of an era. We need you here.

Tellun? Conor thought. Gradually, he realized that the blinding light came from fires. Fire was everywhere.

“Conor!”

Conor jerked his head to his side at the familiar scream. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he realized that he was lying near the edge of a cliff – and not far from him stood Meilin, weighed down with chains. She threw herself at an oncoming Greencloak and knocked him into the dirt. Jhi looked helplessly on.

Rollan was locked in a tight battle with an enormous snake. The snake wrapped its coils around both of his arms, lifting him high in the air. A short distance away, Abeke and Uraza fought what seemed like hundreds of Conquerors.

Briggan! Conor tried to shout the name as he finally managed to get to his feet. He wanted to run to his friends. Why was it so hard to move? *Briggan, come on! We have to help them – where are you?* He called and called for his wolf before he realized that Briggan was in his passive state. But something seemed wrong. The longer Conor stared at the tattoo, the fainter it turned, until he couldn't tell whether or not it was there at all. His heart seized in terror.

Conor.

The gorilla's roar sounded out again, shaking the earth beneath his feet. Conor looked off to a large rock behind where Rollan struggled with the snake. There stood the Great Ape. One of his fists pounded heavily against his chest, while the other fist clutched what looked like a twisted golden staff that gave off a strange, ethereal glow.

The ape swiveled his head toward Conor in such an eerie move that it sent shivers down his spine. The shadow that the beast cast swallowed Conor whole, covering every bit of land as far as the eye could see. When the ape caught sight of Conor, he narrowed his eyes into dangerous slits. Then he threw his head back into another roar. He charged him.

Run! Conor screamed at himself, but his limbs all felt like they were dragging through thick molasses. He tried to lunge forward with each step, only to feel like he was being pulled back. Behind him, the gorilla surged forward, his mighty limbs pounding against the earth. Conor ran toward the edge of the cliff, unsure what he expected to do once he got there. He skidded to a halt just over the edge, arms wheeling. His boots kicked up a shower of pebbles that rained over the cliff side. There was nowhere else to go.

The gorilla roared behind him. He was so close now. Conor cowered near the cliff's edge. All he could see around him were the images of his friends losing the war, struggling against enemies far too strong for them. Greencloaks fell before Conquerors and flames rose into the sky, all against the backdrop of a bleak, dying land.

The gorilla reached him. Conor's boot slipped. He tried to catch himself, but

all he caught was a close glimpse of the gorilla's terrifying eyes. He teetered on the edge.

An enormous eagle appeared overhead. Its wings gleamed bronze and white as they blocked out the sun. Conor looked up at it, and to his amazement, he saw Tarik riding on its back, his cloak billowing out behind him. *Tarik! You're alive!* An indescribable joy and relief washed over him at the sight of the familiar face. Tarik was here. Everything was going to be okay. The Greencloak reached out with one gloved hand toward Conor, and Conor reached up to take it.

Except it wasn't Tarik.

The face transformed. The kind, knowing eyes were replaced with ones cold and cunning. Conor found himself staring up into the face of Shane instead. The boy smiled at him in a way that showed all his teeth at once. In the distance, the gorilla's roar mixed with Tellun's deep voice. Shane withdrew his hand, and Conor saw the abyss yawn beneath him, swallowing him whole.

SLEEPWALKING

IT WAS A COLD, DRIZZLY MORNING AT GREENHAVEN CASTLE. Rollan wrapped his cloak – *Tarik*'s old green cloak, rather – more tightly around his shoulders and wandered out to the main entrance, where he'd seen Abeke surveying the overcast landscape with Uraza at her side. The Coral Octopus hung heavily around his neck, bumping against his chest with every step he took. He found himself reaching up frequently to touch it. After all that had happened – Shane's betrayal, Meilin's turning, *Tarik*'s death – he couldn't afford to lose one of their two remaining talismans.

How long had it been since Shane escaped with the talismans? A few weeks? Somehow, the whole thing felt like it'd happened yesterday. And here they were, still gathering Greencloaks from around the world, building up their forces to face the Conquerors. Rollan's mouth tightened in frustration. If *Tarik* were here, he would tell Rollan not to worry, to calm down and think clearly, to let himself grieve and then move forward with a clear, patient head. But all Rollan could do these days was pace restlessly in the castle, waiting for the word that they could head out to retrieve the talismans, stop Kovo the Ape, and rescue Meilin.

And rescue Meilin.

His fingers stopped fiddling with the Coral Octopus for a moment, suspended by the weight of the thought. Rescuing her felt impossible.

Sometimes, when he chatted with the others, he found himself looking for Meilin so that he could tell her the newest joke in his head. He would yearn to make her laugh, only to realize that she wasn't there. She was far away.

Rollan sighed. He couldn't afford to keep thinking about all that had gone wrong. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to pretend that Tarik was still wandering around somewhere in the castle, that Meilin was asleep in her chambers upstairs. He knew neither was true, but right now, he could force himself to believe, and it kept his darker thoughts at bay.

The weather. That was a much safer thought. *I'll think about the weather.*

For the fifteenth time that morning, Rollan considered how odd the weather had been. This was supposed to be the dry season, but for the past week, as Olvan organized their forces in preparation to leave, they'd gotten nothing but gray skies and steady rain. Even the animals were behaving oddly all of a sudden. The birds were migrating early, for one, and when Rollan looked overhead, he could see another flock heading south in two giant V formations.

"Go ahead, Essix," he murmured to his gyrfalcon, who sat perched on his shoulder. If she kept putting her full weight on him like this, he was going to get a sore back for sure. "I know you want to hunt."

But even Essix seemed out of sorts. She chirped a little, fluffed her neck feathers to shake out water droplets, and settled in even more. She seemed completely content to stay put, instead of heading out for a good hunt. Rollan watched her for a while. When she just went back to preening her tail feathers, he tried to ignore his aching shoulder and decided he'd better leave her be. Far be it from him to judge her sullen mood.

Maybe she loathed waiting around just as much as Rollan did.

By the time he reached the castle entrance, the drizzle had turned into a steady rain. The water beaded on the fabric of his cloak before soaking through. Uraza watched them approach. Her tail swished back and forth. Even though she wasn't his spirit animal, Rollan guessed she probably felt a little impatient with all the waiting too.

Abeke stood beside her, leaning against the archway and absently stroking the leopard's velvety head. She didn't bother turning when Rollan came to join her. The Granite Ram, their only other talisman, dangled from her neck, the pale

gray pendant prominent against the dark of her skin.

“Hey,” Rollan said. “I know you were supposed to be your village’s Rain Dancer and all, but can you lighten up on all the dancing?” He looked up at the sky for emphasis.

Abeke’s eyes flickered to Rollan’s cloak, then went back to surveying the bleak landscape. She didn’t seem amused by his joke, and in embarrassment, he let it fade away. “Hey,” she just said.

Rollan turned serious. “Olvan says we should be able to set out soon, in the next few days.”

“Any new messages?”

He shook his head. They’d sent out dozens of stormy petrels and pigeons to their Greencloak allies and friends in other nations, hoping that some of them would receive the call for help in time to come to their aid. Abeke had sent several doves to Nilo, to deliver the news to her father and sister.

Friends – we make for Stetriol in a week. We need your help.

As far as Rollan knew, Abeke’s father hadn’t responded.

“Sorry,” he replied.

Abeke nodded her thanks, lowered her eyes, and turned away again.

Rollan pursed his lips, for once lacking a witty quip. Where was a good joke when you needed one? Abeke had been like this often lately, staring off at the horizon while lost in thought. He knew she was probably dwelling on Shane’s betrayal, and how Meilin had been forced to turn on all of them. And by the way she lowered her eyes in shame, he knew she still blamed herself for all of it.

Meilin. Again, Rollan scolded himself for returning to the thoughts that kept him tossing at night and pushing away his meals. *Where is she now?* he wondered. What was she thinking?

What must it feel like, to have no power over yourself?

The pain of losing Meilin irritated him for an instant. He’d done so well, for so long, on his own. But now there were people at stake, whose absences hurt him, and he didn’t like it one bit.

As if she could tell what he was thinking, Abeke tilted her head toward him and cleared her throat. “It looks good on you,” she said, offering him a weak smile.

Tarik's cloak. Memories flashed back to him of the elder Greencloak's last stand, of the hopeful look in *Tarik's* eyes when he saw his own cloak draped in Rollan's arms, just before he sacrificed himself. A pain spread in Rollan's chest, until he felt like he could barely breathe.

Still, there was something comforting about Abeke's words. As if *Tarik* wasn't completely gone. Even now, the cloak protected him, shielding him from the rain. Essix ruffled her feathers again, and flecks of water went flying.

"Thanks," he muttered. "Who knew I'd have to wrap myself up to keep warm at this time of year?"

"Olvan says the Greencloaks in Nilo are reporting weird weather there too."

"Like what?"

"Like layers of ice over the watering holes. He said some of the animals don't know what to make of it, and they can't get to the water."

Ice. In Nilo? Rollan tried to imagine the oasis where they'd found Cabaro, encased in a thick layer of ice. "Well. *That* sounds like a nice, normal summer."

Abeke couldn't help smiling a little at his sarcasm. "I can't remember seeing that – or even hearing about it – when I lived in Nilo. The tribes must be in chaos."

"Or skating around and playing games. I mean, *I* would."

That coaxed a genuine laugh out of her. "I can see it. Planks of wood and antelope bone strapped to our feet."

Rollan leaned in with a conspiratorial grin. "I bet *Uraza* would love that. Wouldn't you?" He nodded at *Uraza*, who regarded him with a rather withering look.

The two chuckled a little, and then their moment of humor faded.

Rollan realized that Abeke must be wondering how her father and sister were doing. He shifted his boots against the damp stone floor. "Do you think they're okay?" he asked.

Abeke shrugged. For a moment, she threw her shoulders back in an illusion of confidence. "I haven't thought much about it," she said, almost too careful about her carelessness.

The lie in her words and posture was so obvious that Rollan could have sensed it even without his gifts from Essix. Still, he just nodded along. He had

lost his mentor, the only man he'd ever thought of as a father ... but Abeke's *true* father had turned his back on her. And the person Abeke had always considered a good friend – Shane – had used her friendship too.

“Abeke,” Rollan suddenly said, touching her arm with his hand. She and Uraza both turned to look at him in unison. “Look. I know what you must be going through. You don't have to pretend around me.” He hesitated. He'd never been all that good at gestures of serious emotion. “It's not your fault,” he finally said. “Shane's betrayal ... He's the one who should feel guilty, not you. You couldn't have known. You love and you trust. And I just wanted to say ... well, that I'm sorry people keep taking advantage of that trust.”

Abeke studied him for a long moment. She still looked sad, but Rollan thought he could see some of the guilt lift from her eyes. After a while, she nodded. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I'm sorry that you've had to wait so long to trust others,” she replied.

The two fell into a comfortable silence. After a while, Rollan shook his head and nudged her gently. “The ice will pass, I know it. All I can say is that I'd be mad if Nilo was hogging all the blue sky and sunshine.”

Abeke cracked a wry smile. Uraza let out a comforting rumble deep in her throat, then nudged the girl's hand with her head.

Suddenly Rollan felt Essix's weight shift on his shoulder. An instant later, she pushed off from him and launched herself into the air with an earsplitting shriek. The movement nearly sent him tumbling backward. He flinched, his ears ringing, and looked on as she soared up into the sky. “Hey!” he shouted up at her, annoyed. “I know you're loud – you don't have to show off!”

“What is she doing?” asked Abeke.

“I don't know. Probably decided she was hungry after all.” But the migrating birds were too far off in the distance now. Something else must have caught her attention. Rollan looked at Essix as she flew farther away –

– and then, abruptly, the world rushed forward around him, and he could see through her eyes.

He soared up, up, above the castle and into the open air, and then he looked down at where their small figures stood at the entrance. Essix's gaze turned sharply to focus on one of the castle's battlements. She shrieked again. This

time, it was the distinct cry of something going very, very wrong.

Rollan looked closer. There, along the slippery, wet edge of the battlement's stone barrier, walked *Conor*.

Conor didn't walk in a concentrated way. He swayed and teetered dangerously along the ledge, as if he wasn't quite awake. The hairs rose on the back of Rollan's neck. *What on Erdas is he doing up there?* Rollan blinked, feeling his vision rush back to the ground and return to him. He pointed up in horror.

"Is that *Conor*?" he said incredulously.

"What?" Abeke exclaimed. She looked too. Immediately she straightened, then squinted as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing either. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "*Conor!*" she shouted up at the battlement. "Hey, *Conor!*"

But *Conor* didn't seem to hear her. He didn't seem to notice anything, actually, not even the fact that he was now inching his way along the edge of the battlement. Where was *Briggan*? Rollan glanced frantically around the top of the tower, but the enormous gray wolf was nowhere to be seen. *Briggan* must have been in his passive state.

A chill ran down Rollan's spine as he thought back to *Meilin*'s strange, *Bile*-addled behavior. *What if Conor was somehow affected by the Bile too?* Rollan felt a sudden urge to call out for *Tarik* – until he remembered, with a pang, that *Tarik* was no longer there to help them.

"Come on!" he hissed at Abeke, grabbing her hand. He dashed through the entrance, back into the castle, and toward the stairs leading up to the battlement. They ran up the steps two at a time. Rollan almost tripped on one step, but caught himself and hurried on. *Uraza* bounded beside them, each of her strides equal to three of theirs.

By the time they emerged at the top of the wet battlement, *Uraza* was already there. Rollan wiped rain out of his eyes, and his gaze settled on *Conor*'s teetering figure.

No!

Essix shrieked again and dove for the boy. Rollan lunged forward as fast as he could.

He reached Conor – right as Conor slipped off the edge.



3

THE PLAN

ESSIX DOVE AT THE SAME TIME ROLLAN CRIED OUT. HER talon hooked into the sleeve of Conor's shirt. The fabric ripped – but not all the way. For an instant, Conor dangled precariously in midair.

“Grab him!” Rollan shouted.

Abeke was the closest. She skidded to a crouch on the ledge, using one hand to securely grasp the stone battlement. Then she stretched her free arm out to grab Conor's sleeve. Essix flapped as close as she could – but with each movement, the fabric tore more, until nothing but a few dozen threads kept Conor from plummeting to the ground.

Abeke finally seized Conor's sleeve. She tightened her fist around it and pulled him toward her. The boy groaned at the movement. His eyes opened for the first time – initially, he looked disoriented. Then he glanced down and gasped.

The threads of the fabric snapped.

Conor fell. Abeke gritted her teeth and hung on tight. Conor slammed into the side of the wall, grunting in pain. Abeke hung desperately on to his sleeve, but she could feel her grip slipping. Just when she thought she could hold on no longer, Uraza stretched her neck out and seized Conor's arm in her mouth. She tugged, careful not to break Conor's skin with her teeth.

“*Pull!*” Abeke shouted, working as one with Uraza. Conor looked up at her and used his other hand to grab her wrist. She clenched her jaw. Then Rollan joined her in pulling Conor up, and together they dragged him back over the side of the tower.

The three collapsed in a heap, right as two Greencloaks came running.

“What’s all this?” It was Olvan, and his eyebrows were furrowed.

Abeke stayed where she sat, still trying to catch her breath. Beside her, Uraza blinked water out of her violet eyes and swished her tail. She seemed agitated, enough so that she actually growled at the Greencloaks whenever they got too close to her.

“You tell *us*,” Abeke finally said to Conor, who looked unsure of what had just happened himself. The side of his cheek that had slammed into the tower was already beginning to bruise.

Rollan leaned back and rubbed his shoulder. “Yeah, what was that all about? Recreational attempt at flying? If you wanted to do that, you should’ve let Essix know ahead of time.”

Olvan turned his piercing eyes to Conor. “You were climbing the battlement, boy?”

Conor didn’t say a word. Abeke watched him carefully as he pulled himself into a sitting position and wiped the rain from his face. He seemed deep in thought. She couldn’t guess what he was possibly thinking about, aside from having just narrowly escaped death. It took her a moment to *see* everything wrong with him – he looked particularly pale, and whether his hair was plastered to his face from rain or sweat, she couldn’t tell. Dark circles rimmed the bottom of his eyes.

Olvan helped him to his feet, threw his own cloak around Conor’s shoulders, and guided him away from the battlement. He motioned for Abeke and Rollan to follow. “Let’s get you three out of the rain. This is no way to start a morning.”



An hour later, Abeke, Rollan, and Conor were sitting in the dining hall in fresh, dry clothes, all wrapped in blankets and sipping hot porridge. Abeke’s braids were still plastered to her scalp, matted down with rain. Steam rose from their

heads. She sipped her breakfast gratefully, thinking that if only the porridge had a touch of Niloan spice in it, it could be the best thing she'd ever eaten in her life. Nearby, Rollan was gulping his own porridge down, not even bothering with a spoon. It was the first time this week that Abeke had seen him with an appetite.

Olvan and Lenori sat nearby, as if they feared something else might happen if they left Conor alone. Conor just stirred his bowl of porridge. His eyes focused on nothing in particular, and Abeke thought she could hear him muttering under his breath. Briggan sat beside him with his muzzle in Conor's lap. Conor stroked his head absently.

Abeke finally decided to break the silence. She nudged Conor. "So ... what happened up there?" she asked him carefully. "Sleepwalking?" She didn't want to accuse him aloud of what she knew they all feared – that Meilin had sleepwalked too, when Gerathon controlled her through the Bile. But Conor seemed to hear the concern in her voice.

"It's not that," he said, hesitating. "At least, I don't think so." Conor stayed silent for a moment longer. Then he put his spoon down and nodded. "I've been having dreams again ... ever since Shane took the talismans." Rollan sucked in his breath sharply, but Conor went on. "I'm okay, but I haven't slept well, and I keep dreaming the same things night after night." He hesitated. "I woke up in the middle of the night last week too ... and found myself climbing the battlement."

A chill ran down Abeke's spine. She didn't want to think about what might have happened if Conor hadn't woken himself up in time, and if no one had been around to help him.

Rollan raised an eyebrow. "You could've, you know, *told* someone. I would have happily stood outside your door and whacked you in the head every time you tried to leave."

"Rollan has a valid point," Olvan agreed. "Why did you leave Briggan in his passive state after your first incident, and tell none of your friends?"

Conor shrugged, looking guilty. "I would have, except I had a night when nothing happened. So I thought it went away. I even locked my bedroom door – but I must have unlocked it in my sleep."

Lenori leaned forward, the beads around her neck clacking together. Her

eyes were warm with concern. “What dreams did you have, Conor?” she said gently. “Do you remember?”

Conor took a deep breath. “They started a few weeks ago.” He frowned. “There’s always an ape. And the shadow of antlers. A bright flash of light. Golden leaves.” Conor looked out the window, his expression distant as he relived the vision. “We are all in the middle of a battle. The ape attacks me. I fall over a cliff, but a man riding an eagle soars overhead. At first, I think it’s Tarik coming to my rescue.” Rollan stiffened at the late Greencloak’s name. “But when I reach out to take his hand, I see that it isn’t Tarik at all. It’s Sha –”

Conor cut himself off, but Abeke still winced. She knew the name hanging on the tip of his tongue. She knew it all too well.

Conor cleared his throat. “Anyway, he pretends to save me, and then he lets me fall,” he finished, shooting Abeke a sympathetic look.

Abeke tightened her jaw and tried to push Shane from her mind, but it was hard not to imagine his face. Hard not to imagine how Shane had looked when he rode away on Halawir’s back with the talismans. And now Conor was having dreams about it.

How earnest and sincere Shane had seemed, when he sailed to Greenhaven with her and convinced her to vouch for him, when he’d asked for her help and lied through his teeth without a single flicker of his gaze. How silly she had been, to believe him. *I love that you have that much faith about people. You really are amazing.*

The words echoed, familiar and cruel, in her ears. How *stupid*.

“*Abeke*.” Conor’s voice jerked her out of the memory.

“Huh?” she blurted out.

Rollan was staring at her too, with a concerned look on his face. “We said, are you okay?”

Abeke shook her head, blinked, and straightened. Her mouth set back into a line. “I’m fine,” she replied. “Conor, what do you think your dreams mean? Are they prophetic? I thought you couldn’t do that if Briggan was in his passive state, and you said –”

“I know,” Conor agreed. “That’s what I thought too. But it keeps happening, night after night. I don’t know what’s causing them, but I know they mean

something.”

“What do they mean, then?” Rollan said.

Conor took a deep breath. His eyes darted to Olvan before settling back on his friends. “Kovo has stirred in his prison. I think Shane and Zerif have reached him, or are going to reach him soon. We’re going to fight a great war in Stetriol.”

The hall fell silent at Conor’s ominous words. After a moment, he went on. “I don’t know what the golden leaves mean, but ... every time I saw them, I felt a heartbeat under my feet, something deep and powerful in the ground.”

“The heart of the lands,” Lenori murmured in wonder, and everyone turned to her. She nodded at Conor. “There is an ancient myth among the Amayan tribes of a place in Erdas that is the origin of all life – humans, animals, even the Great Beasts. The tale calls this the place where the heart of our world still beats. Perhaps what you felt was the birthplace of Erdas. If so, there is a lot more at stake than we thought.”

Abeke’s heart skipped a beat. She had heard similar myths as a little girl, tales that named Nilo as the first of the lands.

Rollan cleared his throat. “Did you see anything about Meilin?” he asked, the hope obvious in his voice.

Conor met the other boy’s eyes reluctantly. “I saw her and Jhi fighting Greencloaks, with the Conquerors at her back. They disappeared into the fray.”

Rollan’s entire posture drooped. His face darkened as he returned to his porridge. Abeke could tell that Conor regretted saying anything at all.

Olvan sat taller in his seat and gave the three as comforting of a look as he could. “These are visions, not yet truth,” he reminded them. “All is not yet lost. And we received several new messages this morning.”

At that, Abeke leaned forward. “From whom? Where?”

“Our friends Finn, Kalani, and Maya will arrive in Greenhaven tomorrow.”

Maya! Kalani! It would be good to see them again. Finn too. Abeke waited for him to list a few more names, but the elder Greencloak finished, and the hall settled back into an uneasy silence. Her face fell again. Her father’s name was not among them. Why was she surprised? Still, she managed a smile. “No others?” she asked hopefully.

Olvan shook his head, clearly dismayed that he could not give her better

news. “With Conor’s prophecy, we cannot wait any longer. We will take two parties and set out separately.” He looked at the others. “Abeke, Rollan, and Conor – you will travel with a small patrol of our best Greencloaks. You will move faster and more stealthily this way, giving you the chance to search for Kovo’s prison and the stolen talismans. I will lead a larger force of Greencloaks from a different direction and meet you there. Too many Conquerors will be gathered in Stetriol for your smaller team to face alone – our forces will provide a distraction for the Conquerors, so that you are able to get through and carry out your mission.”

A brief silence fell over them. Abeke saw Rollan’s eyes wander over to the empty chair beside Lenori. Tarik would have sat there. He would have been at this meeting, and his presence would have reassured them. Now there was only an echo of him in the air, a ghost. Abeke knew Rollan must be thinking about that now. He pushed his porridge bowl away, as if suddenly uninterested.

“What about Tellun?” Rollan muttered. He looked around. “I mean, there’s still the Platinum Elk.”

Lenori shook her head. “I have not seen nor felt Tellun’s presence.”

Olvan folded his hands before him. “We cannot afford a separate mission to find Tellun and the Platinum Elk. There is no time to lose.”

“Conor said he saw a shadow of antlers in his dream,” Abeke added. “Maybe that’s where we’ll find Tellun too, at the heart of Erdas.”

Rollan nodded, probably relieved that they could finally be on the move again. If they had to wait any longer to go after Shane and rescue Meilin ...

Conor still had a troubled look on his face. Abeke reached out and tapped his arm. “What’s the matter?” she said, a knot of dread tightening in her stomach. “Is there more to what you saw?”

Conor nodded. This time, his stare focused not on his friends, but on their spirit animals. He met Essix’s piercing eyes, then looked at Uraza lounging beside Abeke. His own hand stayed on Briggan’s neck, buried in the fur.

“In my vision, I saw Briggan, Essix, Uraza, and Jhi in the battle with us. I saw ... I saw Uraza overwhelmed by Conquerors, and Briggan’s tattoo disappeared from my arm. Jhi was helpless, and Essix was nowhere at all.”

Silence.

“I think ...” Conor said slowly, as if unwilling to say the words aloud, “that our spirit animals may not survive this war.”



4

PRISONER

THE PRISON DOOR WAS UNLOCKED.

It was always unlocked. Gerathon saw to it, because she knew that it made no difference for Meilin. She wanted Meilin to sit here, cowering against the wet, mossy dungeon wall of her prison cell, staring for hours at the door that taunted her with the freedom she knew she couldn't have.

Meilin wrapped her cloak more tightly around her and snuggled against Jhi's fur. She couldn't sleep. If she could see herself in a mirror, she knew there would be dark circles under her eyes. Whenever she did manage to sleep, she dreamed of her father. She would wake thinking that he was alive – alive! – somehow, maybe even here with her in this cell. But then the images from her dreams would fade away, and reality would settle heavily back into the pit of her stomach.

Her fingers played numbly with a sash tied around her waist. They had cut away her manacles. No point in escaping. She couldn't trust herself anymore, not in her current state. Even now, with Gerathon far off doing ... whatever she did, Meilin could feel the subtle, menacing presence of *someone else* in her mind, coiled in the shadows and waiting to lash out when needed. She shuddered at the memory of the snake's domination – the helplessness of not being able to control her own limbs and actions. What would she do if she escaped the dungeons and

went back to her friends, anyway? Betray them again?

“At least Abeke is free,” she whispered under her breath. Abeke should have made it back to Greenhaven by now, with Shane in tow. Meilin couldn’t understand Abeke’s attachment to that boy, although a part of her sympathized, wondering how it must feel for Shane to have been used by the Conquerors – to watch his sister die like that. She hoped the Greencloaks had accepted him too, and that they were both safe now.

Beside her, Jhi made a deep sound in her throat that set her entire body humming. Meilin paused in her thoughts to look up at her panda. Jhi returned her gaze with wide dark eyes. She knew what the panda was trying to say.

Don’t worry. The others will return for us. This won’t go on forever.

“No,” Meilin snapped for the hundredth time. She recalled Abeke and Shane leaving her, promising that they would return for her. She’d let them go.

“They’re not coming back. There’s no point. I don’t even think I want them to.”

One look at Jhi’s mournful gaze was enough to send guilt shooting through Meilin’s heart. She patted the panda’s fur. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.” She sighed. “Oh, Jhi. What will happen to us?” She laughed a little, a sad sound. “Do you think ... do you think the universe made a mistake, pairing the two of us together? Do you think it knew how I would treat you?”

When Jhi only made the rumbling sound in her throat again, sending soothing tremors through Meilin, she shook her head. *Maybe I wasn’t supposed to have a Great Beast at all. But I’m glad I do.* She squeezed Jhi’s side softly. Once, she would have forced Jhi into the passive state and kept her there, too annoyed to deal with Jhi’s insufferably patient, sympathetic expression. Now, she couldn’t imagine sitting in this cell without the panda’s presence nearby. “Forgive me, Jhi. I’m just ... so tired. So tired of not having my thoughts be my own.”

Jhi licked her hand in reassurance. Meilin leaned against her, soaking in her familiar comfort, and closed her eyes. The image of Gerathon’s smiling jaws and slithering body disappeared, replaced instead with Rollan’s lopsided grin and Conor’s encouraging voice, Abeke’s clear laugh.

The prison door’s hinges squealed. Meilin shot to her feet right as Jhi let out a low growl.

It was Shane.

He looked more tired than she remembered, the bags under his eyes dark and prominent, but it was still unmistakably Shane. His silhouette was stark against the opening of the cell, looking uninjured. His shirt was unbuttoned low into his chest, almost casually.

A surge of excitement and fear cut through her melancholy. Meilin could hardly believe her eyes – she didn't even know how to feel. For a moment, the two just stared at each other in complete silence.

Finally Meilin found her voice. "You came back ..." she whispered.

Shane nodded. "I did."

They had come back to rescue her, after all.

In spite of everything, Meilin burst into a grin. She felt a sudden urge to hug him. The dark thoughts that had plagued her just a moment ago suddenly vanished. If Shane was here, then that meant he and Abeke had made it back to Greenhaven!

Abeke has reunited with the others.

It meant all sorts of things. The questions started to spill out of her before she could stop herself. "Is Abeke safe? Are there others with you? Did you come with Greencloaks? The east stairs of the dungeon are crawling with –"

"I'm here alone."

Meilin wrung her hands. She looked uncertainly around the cell. "How are we going to get out of here? And even if we do – if I go with you – Gerathon can still see and control everything." She gave Shane a determined look. "You shouldn't have come back. Just leave me here, and go help the others. I'll only make everything worse. I –"

Jhi's growl cut her sentence short. Meilin shot her a quizzical look. "What's wrong? It's just Shane." She glanced back to him. "Shane, we have to ..."

Her words faded away. Meilin frowned, suddenly hesitant. Something seemed different about Shane's expression ... in fact, something seemed off about this entire encounter.

"Shane?" Meilin said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Shane replied. Even the sound of his voice seemed different – colder, somehow, a far cry from what she remembered. "I just came

by to check on you.”

Meilin raised a skeptical eyebrow. In the past, her instincts had always guided her thinking and actions. Even now, with her trust in her own perception shaken by the Bile, she wanted to rely on her gut feeling ... and her gut was telling her that something was horribly off. A low growl continued to rumble from Jhi’s throat. Meilin took a step back.

Then she noticed something peeking out from the opening of his shirt. Part of a dark mark. A tattoo? She frowned, focusing closer on it. Yes, it looked like ... reptilian teeth, protruding from a jaw of scaly skin. She gasped. The rest of the tattoo disappeared inside his shirt, but Meilin didn’t need to see all of it to understand.

The teeth and scaly skin belonged unmistakably to a crocodile. But a crocodile was *the Devourer’s* spirit animal....

Behind Shane, two Conquerors emerged in full armor. They saluted him as soon as they arrived. Meilin glanced back to him at the same time that he narrowed his eyes. “I came back to make sure you are still in your cell, and that you are well.”

A million thoughts rushed through her mind. “Shane ... ?” she managed to say. Impossible. It couldn’t be.... A glint of metal from Shane’s light blond hair caught Meilin’s attention. She recognized the circlet she’d seen Gar wearing – a snake devouring its own tail.

“Yes. I’m the Reptile King.” He lifted an eyebrow at her. “Are you really so surprised?”

Shane. The thought sank into her mind. Shane was the Devourer?

“Your wolverine ...” Meilin gasped out, trying to make sense of it all. She glanced again at the tip of his tattoo, hoping that the second time around, she might see something different.

But the teeth and scales were still there. Like they’d been there forever.

“You ...” Meilin said. “In Zhong, when –” She choked on her words, and it took her a second try to get them out. “It was you all along. *You* killed my father!”

Shane just shook his head. “Save your indignation,” he replied, leaning against the wall. “It wasn’t me in that armor at Dinesh’s temple, it was my uncle.

And Gar is dead. The Greencloaks killed him in Nilo, shortly after you saw him. Your revenge is complete. I've merely come to inform you that we'll set out soon, and you're invited to join us. I'm sure you'll want to come along."

Meilin's emotions warred against each other until she could hardly breathe. Gar was dead, but Shane – the true Devourer – had betrayed them. Somehow, that felt even worse. He had never wanted to help them.

What about Abeke?

She didn't make it back to Greenhaven, Meilin thought in horror. *She might even be dead*. The possibility that Shane had hurt her friend, the thought that Abeke ... Blood rushed to her head, making her sway. The room spun for a moment. With the fear came a flood of rage. Meilin trembled from head to toe. With a furious cry, she hurled herself at him. She could feel the world around her slowing down as Jhi's abilities came rushing to the forefront – she saw Shane throw his arms up in defense, but the movement looked long and labored. Meilin balled up her fist. She managed to dodge past his arms and strike him square in the jaw. Shane staggered backward in slow motion.

"Jhi!" Meilin called out.

Jhi braced herself, then lunged for the boy too.

Then, abruptly, the coiled monster in the shadows of her mind reared its ugly head. Numbness froze all of Meilin's limbs. She gasped. The world, so slow a moment ago, suddenly sped up, rushing around her in a streaked blur. Meilin blinked, trying to keep up.

Shane darted backward – a thunderous roar echoed in the cell. Something green and brown and scaly flashed before Meilin's eyes. An instant later, she felt a tremor go through the floor and fell to her knees. Jhi halted in her attack. Meilin managed only to hold a hand up to her face and stumble backward. Her limbs felt detached and weak.

An enormous saltwater crocodile appeared between them and Shane, its legs as thick as tree trunks. Meilin gasped. The beast opened its jaws at Jhi, then slammed its tail down on the floor. Its eyes were slitted and shiny. They glinted with something savage, completely different from the warmth in Jhi's eyes.

Jhi nudged Meilin back, putting herself protectively between Meilin and the crocodile.

Shane brushed hair out of his eyes and sighed. “Call your panda into its dormant state,” he said. “Now.”

More fog seeped into Meilin’s mind. She staggered, clutching at her head and trying in vain to fight off Gerathon’s presence. The compulsion was as strong as ever. She felt herself putting out her arm, as if she were a Zhongese puppet toy, opening her mouth to call Jhi back. Jhi cowered, lowering her head.

A memory came to Meilin of Abeke. Abeke, who could be in serious trouble right now.

No. Fight it.

With a mighty effort, Meilin gritted her teeth and tried to push back. Lights burst in her vision. Shane smiled at her as she struggled. One of his hands ran along the scales of his crocodile. “Abeke was right,” he said. “You *are* stubborn.”

The mention of Abeke gave Meilin more fuel. She clenched her jaw, bracing herself against the fog that threatened to take over. Her hand was still outstretched in Jhi’s direction, but the commands halted on her tongue, clamoring for release.

No.

The lights across her vision grew, blinding her. She squinted as they erased her surroundings for a moment.

Was Jhi causing this? It all felt similar to the glowing orbs Meilin would sometimes see when Jhi helped her to make decisions calmly, but somehow ... it was different too. This time, the light narrowed into a line across her vision, then centered as if she were staring down a dark tunnel toward something impossibly bright and warm. The golden path cut through the blue-gray haze of fog, of the Bile’s whisper and poison. Meilin reached for the light.

The light pushed the fog back. Only for an instant.

Meilin withdrew her hand, refusing to call Jhi into her dormant state. Then she lunged at Shane once more.

Shane’s eyes popped open in surprise. Meilin managed to strike a glancing blow against his cheek before his crocodile’s tail caught her legs and sent her crashing to the ground. Shane drew his saber and pointed it at her throat. All hints of amusement were gone from his face.

“Chain both of them to the wall,” he commanded. The two Conquerors waiting behind him moved immediately.

Meilin shook her head as she felt the soldiers pinning her hands against the cold stone of the wall, then clapping chains around her wrists. Her rebellion had already ended. Gerathon’s coils slithered across her thoughts – in her mind, Meilin heard the Great Serpent chuckling. Beside her, the panda stared cautiously at the crocodile while a Conqueror secured her paws with manacles.

Poor little girl, Gerathon hissed inside Meilin’s mind. *I’ll have to be careful with you.*

Gerathon chuckled again, but somehow, Meilin thought she could detect a hint of wariness from the serpent. Somehow, in some way, Meilin had managed to *push back* against the Bile. It hadn’t lasted long. But it had *lasted*.

Shane cast her one last look before calling his crocodile back. It vanished in a flash of light to reappear on his chest. He scowled. Meilin knew he would never admit it, but she could see that her moment of defiance had shaken him. As Gerathon lost interest in controlling her, she felt the fog dissipate from her mind and bring the prison cell back into sharp focus. Her anger returned with it.

Shane had been the Devourer all along. He fooled us.

“See to it that her door stays locked,” Shane snapped at the Conquerors. Then he motioned for them to file out.

Meilin found her voice right as Shane was about to leave. “I don’t know what you did to Abeke,” she spit out, “but you don’t deserve her. And if you hurt her, I’ll make sure you pay for what you did.”

Shane hesitated with one foot still inside her cell. He didn’t turn around. Instead, his jaw tightened, and a strange emotion flickered across his face, something Meilin almost wanted to interpret as ... regret.

The moment lasted barely a few seconds, and it passed so quickly that Meilin couldn’t be sure he’d hesitated at all.

Then he stepped out of her cell, and the door shut with a loud, echoing clank.

Meilin sat in the new silence, savoring that echo, listening to the Conquerors’ footsteps disappear down the hall. In spite of everything, she couldn’t stop a small smile from creeping onto her face. Jhi blinked when she looked at her.

Gerathon had kept that cell door open to taunt her all this time, knowing she couldn't – *wouldn't* – escape.

But the door was locked now, because Meilin had *forced* them to do it. She continued to dwell on this. And she dared to hope.



5 OLD FRIENDS

THE FOLLOWING DAY, ALLIES WHO HAD RECEIVED AND accepted their call for help began to arrive, just as Olvan had said they would. Conor waited anxiously to see each of them cresting the horizon and approaching the castle in sporadic groups. It would be a long, hard road ahead for all of them, but at least they were in the company of old friends.

First came Finn, the Greencloak covered in tattoos who had helped the team find Rumpfuss the Boar. Finn arrived in stoic fashion, leaner than before and quieter than ever, although he did manage to crack a small smile of greeting when he saw Conor, Abeke, and Rollan. At his side was Donn, his sleek black wildcat. The cat purred as they made their way back to Greenhaven Castle. Conor marveled at him, remembering the awe they all had felt when they first realized Finn's spirit animal was this legendary creature.

"And how has life treated you in Glengavin?" Abeke asked as they walked.

Finn shook his head. "Very well," he replied, "until last week."

"Why?" Conor asked. "What happened?"

"What a shame that we reunite under such circumstances." Finn's voice turned grim. "You'll recall our friend MacDonnell, yes? His castle, his law? Well, the Conquerors returned to Trunswick, this time in huge numbers, and laid siege. Lord MacDonnell was forced to retreat and leave his estate to the

Conquerors. He will commit his soldiers to our cause.”

Rollan made an angry sound in his throat. “Our week hasn’t been great either,” he said, pointing up at the dreary sky. “Although I’d much rather get soaked by rain than sacked by Conquerors.”

Conor felt sad at the thought of the mighty lord’s castle now overrun by Conquerors. Somehow, the older image of Lord MacDonnell in complete control of his domain was comforting. It seemed like such a long time ago. They’d only just learned that Zhong had fallen. Nilo had still been free. The Conquerors were moving fast now.

Next came Kalani, all the way from the islands of Oceanus, her cloak of seaweed now replaced with a standard cloak. She looked more irritated than Conor remembered, which he figured might have something to do with the fact that she was now in a place quite opposite to that of a tropical paradise. Still, she greeted Conor warmly, even as she muttered something about the never-ending cold drizzle.

“Thank you for coming, Kalani,” Conor said with a smile. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you,” Kalani replied. “It’s only a matter of time before the Conquerors take Oceanus completely. I didn’t want to wait around for that to happen.”

She greeted Abeke too, but when Rollan tried to say hello, Kalani’s lips tightened and she looked away. Rollan’s smile vanished as he did the same. It took Conor a moment to remember that Kalani still considered Rollan *tapu*—dangerous and forbidden—and therefore could not acknowledge him. This would make for an awkward journey.

As the day went on, Conor noticed that Abeke hovered constantly at the windows facing the harbors. He knew who she was searching for, and who she hoped to see. But they didn’t come.

At the end of the day, only Maya and her fire salamander joined them, significantly less bothered by the chilly weather. Conor laughed in surprise at the sight of her. Maya looked nothing like she had when they’d last seen her, when she’d lain limp and nearly lifeless after unleashing the fury of her fire against the Conquerors. Her red hair had been burned away and her cheek scarred with a vicious wound. The scar was still there, a faint but permanent blemish, but

Maya's red hair had grown back a little, enough for her to tuck it behind her ears, and a healthy pink glow illuminated her face. There was a weight in her brilliant blue eyes that didn't exist before, the lingering pain of the past ... but time had a curious way of healing things, and Maya had managed to cover that burden with the new joy of seeing her friends again.

She squealed at the sight of them all, then threw herself into a hug with Conor, Abeke, and Rollan. Her fire salamander, Tini, watched from her shoulder, his bright yellow spots pulsing happily at the reunion.

"Other Greencloaks from Eura are on their way too," Maya told them as they headed toward the hall for dinner. Her short hair bounced with each step. "They'll join Olvan's forces." She glanced at Conor and nodded. "I'll go with your smaller patrol. You probably won't need any fire while traveling through Stetriol, but you'll certainly need a friendly face." She paused to look adoringly at her spirit animal. "And we are the friendliest faces, aren't we, Tini? Yes, we are!"

They all laughed. Seeing the old affection between the two of them lifted Conor's heart for a moment. It was really, *really* good to have Maya back.

The conversation over dinner stayed low. Conor felt like he could touch the tension in the air.

"A ship with other Greencloaks has set sail from Oceanus. They will join Olvan's forces in Stetriol." Kalani rubbed at her dolphin mark, the other tattoos lining her arms bold in the candlelight. Conor felt sorry for her that she couldn't call on her spirit animal in a place like this. She looked warily around the table. "Do we even know how to get to Kovo's prison, or the heart of Erdas?"

Olvan looked uncomfortable at the question, but he lifted his head authoritatively. "There are rumors of where Kovo's prison is. Ancient accounts of the first war tell of a chain of mountains in Stetriol, near which lies a formation called Muttering Rock. They say Tellun imprisoned Kovo there. Conor's visions of the red rock also support this theory. It will be a good starting point for us."

"We have some old maps," a voice called from the end of the table. A Greencloak named Dorian sat with them. Conor hadn't remembered seeing him around the castle. He looked unpleasantly pale, with dark blond hair tied back in

a short tail at the nape of his neck. His lips were thin and drawn back into a stern line.

Dorian laid out several parchments, faded and crinkling with age. He spread them flat on the table for everyone to see. “These are generations old, discovered in some ancient library texts.” He pointed to a landmass on each that Conor had never seen before on any present-day map. “Stetriol.”

Kalani didn’t look reassured. Neither did Finn. He frowned at the older Greencloak. “This is all we have to go on? Visions? Rumors? Maps from hundreds of years ago? The world has changed much since then. This will hardly be reliable.” He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “I mean no offense, Conor,” he added, “and I know your dreams are crucial to this, but we are heading into true darkness. The very center of it.”

Conor saw Abeke shiver visibly. When she noticed him looking at her, she looked away and reached for a piece of bread. Abeke tore it in half, the crust crackling as she went. “We’ll be prepared,” she said, trying to sound optimistic. “We’ll have plenty of water and provisions with us.”

Kalani frowned and rubbed harder at her tattoo. Conor wondered how much water a place like Stetriol might have. The sight reminded Conor of his dream, of how he’d stared and stared at his tattoo of Briggan until he couldn’t see him at all anymore. *I might not have Briggan forever.* Just the thought sent a stab of pain through him. He buried his hand deeper in the wolf’s fur.

“Do we know if Stetriol has any harbors?” Kalani asked. “How many people still live there?”

“We know very little of Stetriol,” Olvan answered. It was not what anyone wanted to hear. The Greencloak furrowed his brows. “Abeke is right. We will prepare the best we can.”

Conor swallowed hard. He was sitting in a room with the world’s finest Greencloaks, and no one sounded confident about their mission. They were sailing into the unknown now, an untouched and forgotten land. Briggan and the other Four Fallen had died leading the Greencloaks into Stetriol. What would happen this time?

“Sending the Four Fallen blindly into Stetriol,” Finn said, “and sending an army of Greencloaks as their diversion, to face the Conquerors ...” His eyes

were tragic. He met Olvan's stare and held it. "This is a suicide mission, Olvan," he said gently.

Conor could feel the dread that rippled through the room. He, Rollan, and Abeke all looked at Olvan, half expecting him to deny such a claim. But he didn't.

"We leave tomorrow, at dawn," Olvan finally replied, his voice very quiet.

The realization slowly settled into Conor's heart. This was it, the final stand. Tomorrow, they would leave Greenhaven. And they might never return.

In the silence that followed, Finn bowed his head. He put a hand flat on the table. "I'm ready," he said.

"Me too," Maya added.

"Me too," echoed Rollan and Kalani at the same time. It startled them, and they looked at each other in surprise before they remembered that they weren't supposed to acknowledge each other. Kalani quickly looked away again.

Conor chimed in too, followed by Abeke, and gradually, everyone at the table pledged themselves to the journey. They were all ready to lay down their lives. Conor looked around the room, memorizing the moment and the faces.

Finally Rollan grabbed another dinner roll and bit into it with determination. "Better eat up now, then. It'll be a hard road."



THE JOURNEY TO STETRIOL BEGAN UNDER A FRAGILE sheet of rain and fog, with the smaller of the two Greencloak groups heading out first. Abeke, Conor, and Rollan each rode separately on their own horses; Uraza walked beside Abeke's mount, while Briggan loped easily alongside Conor. Essix soared ahead, seeking out the harbor where the *Tellun's Pride* waited for them. Sacks of provisions bumped against each of their horses' hindquarters. Behind them came Maya and Kalani. Finn rode ahead, talking in a low voice to the Greencloak named Dorian, who had been tasked with leading the little troupe. Dorian was now pointing out something on one of the ancient maps he'd brought. On his shoulder perched his spirit animal, a horned owl.

"I'm not sure he's going to lead us in the right direction," muttered Rollan. His eyes were fixed on Dorian and filled with resentment. "And an owl? Really? Is his hoot going to scare the Conquerors away?"

"He's the keeper of the maps," Conor replied, clearly trying to keep their conversation reasonable.

But Abeke understood Rollan's impatience. Dorian had woken each of them up that morning by pounding on their doors and shouting, like a father chiding his oversleeping children. He galloped ahead now, as if he had always been their leader, as if Tarik had never existed.

Rollan snorted. It didn't seem like "keeper of the maps" impressed him much.

"Keep Briggan out, okay?" he said. One of his hands checked idly for the Coral Octopus looped around his neck. "It would be nice if we didn't have to save you from your dreams every other day."

Conor shot him a guilty look, then glanced at Abeke. "Got the Granite Ram?"

Abeke nodded, showing him the necklace that kept it securely against her chest. She tugged once on it, just to be sure. "You can hang on to it, if you want," she said.

Conor shook his head. "I'd rather not."

Abeke gave him a small smile. Even after all this time, he still seemed a little hesitant to be the one responsible for hanging on to a talisman. She stared at him for a moment longer as he turned his attention back to the trek. How different Conor looked from when they'd first started their journeys together – he'd grown taller, and lost the fat in his cheeks. Even Rollan, with all his jokes, had changed ever since he lost Tarik and donned the green cloak. He was more focused. More serious. The realization took Abeke off guard. How quickly they'd all changed.

Her thoughts wandered back to her father and sister, and whether their village in Nilo was truly covered in snow. Uraza turned her violet eyes up at Abeke, as if she could read the girl's mind. Abeke just smiled. "We're okay," she said. "I don't need them here." Then she turned away from her spirit animal, so Uraza couldn't tell that she'd lied.

Most of all, she didn't want Uraza to see how afraid she was that she might lose her.

By the time they reached the *Tellun's Pride*, the entire party looked like a pack of waterlogged rats in wet green cloaks. The ship's captain was already waiting for them at the pier, hollering at the top of his lungs at the crew hoisting crates and rolling barrels up the ramp.

He shook his head grimly as Finn and Dorian approached, then pointed down at the water. "Choppy, murky waters today," he muttered. "We'll have some rough seas to endure." He pointed to where taut ropes at the bow of the

Tellun's Pride disappeared beneath the waves. "And the rockback whales – they may be sick."

"I'll check on them," Kalani said, shrugging her right shoulder, which housed her dolphin tattoo. She winced – light flashed briefly around her, and a moment later, everyone heard the unmistakable call of a dolphin from the water. Kalani leaned over the pier. Abeke was certainly no sea creature expert, but even she could tell that the dolphin was unhappy to be in this cold, unfamiliar ocean. She felt her heart tug at the sight of Kalani's brow furrowing in concern.

"See how the rockback whales are doing," Kalani called down to her dolphin. "Be careful."

The dolphin made a subtle nodding gesture before diving below the surface. They all waited for a few quiet minutes.

All of a sudden, the dolphin exploded from the surface of the black water with a strange, sickly sound. Kalani gasped. She leaned forward and held her arm out.

"Come back up!" she said.

The dolphin splashed around a bit more on its side. Light engulfed the creature before it vanished from the water and returned to Kalani's shoulder. Kalani swayed. Conor and Rollan had to rush forward to keep her from falling backward. Abeke felt sick to her stomach at the sight. She didn't want to imagine Uraza in that kind of agony.

Kalani finally turned to the captain. "The churning water has brought in some schools of tiny, poisonous fish. They are making the whales sick. We have to leave. Now. The whales won't survive if they continue like this."

"Is Katoa okay?" Abeke asked.

Kalani nodded with a tight mouth. "She's very sensitive to the water, even more so than the whales." She sighed. "With the sea around Oceanus also unhealthy, I haven't let her into the water in days. She's not happy."

Maya patted Kalani once on the shoulder. "Thank you for the warning," she said. "We better get moving."

"You heard her," the captain shouted to his crew, triggering another flurry of activity on the ship's deck. "Move out!"

Abeke walked up the ramp with the others. She tried not to look at the black

water again.



7

DISRUPTION

THE WATER TURNED LIGHTER AFTER THEY REACHED OPEN waters. Still, the air felt heavy and oppressive, in part, Abeke knew, because everyone felt a little bit anxious. Uraza’s tail swished restlessly, and Abeke knew it wasn’t just because they were on a ship – Uraza’s least favorite form of travel. In fact, everyone’s spirit animals seemed slightly on edge.

“Donn!” Finn shouted as he chased his black wildcat across the deck of the ship. Abeke and the others were in the middle of a lesson with Dorian on how to use the ship’s cannons. Scampering barely in front of the wildcat was Maya’s fire salamander, Tini, giving off indignant little squeaks every time the wildcat swiped his claws at him. Chasing Finn was Maya, her hair in complete disarray, as if she had just awoken from a nap.

Tini reached the end of the deck, then turned and hissed at the wildcat. Maya managed to catch up just in time to call for her salamander. “Into the dormant state with you!” she exclaimed. Tini obliged all too willingly.

“Sorry about that,” Finn said breathlessly. He gave his wildcat a reproachful glare, while Donn gave him the same look in return. Abeke, Conor, and Rollan all looked on from the cannon they were crowded around while Finn straightened his clothes and tried to walk off in a dignified manner.

Rollan raised an eyebrow. “I would just like to point out,” he stated, looking

skyward, “that Essix has been on her best behavior.”

“That’s because she gets to fly,” Conor said. He’d kept Briggan in dormant state for most of the journey so far.

“Hey, Essix isn’t having the best time either,” Rollan retorted. Overhead, Essix circled restlessly, making agitated little squawks. “She thinks the fish taste funny.”

“All right,” Dorian interrupted, nodding back down at the cannon. “Attention back there, all three of you.”

As Dorian explained how to light the fuse once powder had been loaded into the cannon, Rollan gave him a mutinous look. Abeke tightened her lips. She shook her head at Rollan, warning him not to be so defiant to their new leader. Rollan remained silent, but the resentment stayed on his face.

As they sailed through the narrow sea dividing Eura and Nilo, they saw more that worried them. Where fertile farmland once thrived in southern Eura, enormous cracks now marred the parched, scorched earth left behind by invading patrols of Conquerors. Farmers gathered on the shore to watch them sail past, looking lost. Abeke wondered if they thought one of the passing ships could stop and save them, or perhaps take them far away to somewhere safe. Farther east, they passed entire cities that had been overtaken, their flags now gone and replaced with the Conquerors’.

“We must detour from our planned route,” Dorian announced to everyone one morning as he studied his maps. “The Conquerors have seized an important trade strait between Nilo and Eura.”

“Tarik would never have let us sail this far without knowing that,” Rollan muttered under his breath. Abeke rolled her eyes at him. They’d just heard about the seizure that morning by messenger pigeon.

She pictured her homeland overrun by Conquerors, and could hardly bear the thought: the peppers and wild grasses burned away, razed by the invading soldiers. The antelope all migrating from the fighting. Would the lions and hyenas turn on the tribes in hunger? What would the people eat? What were the Conquerors going to do to them?

They docked that afternoon in Balanhara, a port city situated at the beginning of a thin strait between Nilo and Zhong, to restock their provisions.

It was a mistake.

“Look,” Conor muttered to Abeke as they walked through the port’s narrow streets behind Maya and Rollan. All of them were balancing barrels of water on their heads. Kalani had stayed behind to help on the ship. “Conquerors attacked this city.”

The inner city still had some of its beauty – baskets and bags of colorful spices sat out in the open markets. Their smells were rich and enticing, reminiscent to Abeke of home. Bright glass trinkets hung from the crowded wooden stalls, reflecting the sunlight. But Conor was right. Once-beautiful homes were now pitiful structures of crumbling stone and broken wood. The harbor itself was almost completely destroyed by fire, with two of its piers washed entirely away.

Beggars crowded the alleys, their thin arms outstretched. People paraded through the streets several times during their walk, the processions all in honor of the dead. Mourners hoisted the deceased on their shoulders in ominous white carriers.

Abeke looked away. So many funeral processions.

“All this couldn’t have happened in just a week,” she whispered to Conor.

Conor bent down to pick up a glittering tile fragment that had once belonged on the side of a building. He admired it sadly, holding it in the sunlight. “The Conquerors move fast,” he muttered. He put the fragment carefully in his pocket, as if a reminder of what their mission was for.

Maya turned back to look at them. Her fire salamander stayed hidden behind her loose hair. “I just overheard a passerby. In the past two weeks, Balanhara suffered two sieges. The Conquerors finally passed through, but they left behind a trail of destruction. They’ve destroyed huge areas of the region.” She paused to look sadly at the beggars. “A lot of victims.”

As they passed more homes, Abeke saw that makeshift talismans hung on many of the doorways. The talismans were made out of barnacles, bits of broken clay, and beads. They were crafted in rough imitation of *real* talismans, the Coral Octopus and the Slate Elephant, the Marble Swan and the Silver Wolf, each dangling like a silent wish for help from the Great Beasts. Abeke’s heart twisted.

“We have to do something,” she said. But she didn’t know what. Maybe all

of this was because Kovo had already been freed from his prison – that they were too late. The thought made her shudder.

Rollan paused as they entered a small marketplace with food carts. The space looked like it usually held many more stands, but now only a few stood here and there. Most sold small, sallow potatoes and other roots that had survived the raids. Other stands sold rotten meat swarming with flies. Abeke guessed that the meat must have been salvaged from cattle killed during the siege. She wrinkled her nose at the smell, sickened by the reality that the people would be forced to eat such things.

The only cart selling something that looked good was situated at the far corner of the market. Abeke’s stomach rumbled; they had all skipped breakfast in order to help out with gathering provisions, and now the sun hung high overhead. She joined Rollan’s side to stare longingly at the golden-brown meat buns the vendor was frying over a flat iron disc.

“Let’s pick some up for the others on the ship too,” Conor said as Rollan pulled out a pouch of coins.

“Don’t worry,” Rollan replied, handing the money over. “I promise I won’t eat all of them.”

The vendor gave them bags of meat buns, and then they continued on their way. Abeke bit enthusiastically into hers. The food was delicious – the fatty juices spilled down her chin, the spices making her tongue tingle. She wiped her mouth with the edge of her sleeve. Conor was popping his last bite into his mouth, while Rollan had already finished one and was digging for another.

As they walked and ate, Abeke thought she could see a seagull following them from broken roof to broken roof, but it flew off every time she tried to look at it. She didn’t dwell too much on it, though. They were in a port city, after all, and close to the water. The seagulls must be just as hungry as she was.

They turned into a filthy alley. What they saw made all of them pause in their steps.

Beggar children huddled here, their gray rags barely able to hide their skinny arms and legs. At first, they startled at the strangers. Then their eyes darted to the bags of food in their arms.

Abeke stared back at them, her appetite suddenly fading. These children

were younger than they were – some much, much younger. Maya swallowed hard, her cheeks reddening. “Orphans,” she whispered.

The children didn’t dare make a move. Rollan was the first to break the stillness by bending down to a little girl. She shrank away from him. “It’s okay,” he murmured. “I remember living this life.” Then he reached into his bag and pulled out a meat bun. He held it out to her. “Bet you’re hungry.”

The girl stared at him with wide eyes. She blinked at the food right in front of her face, still steaming hot. Then she reached out and hesitantly took it from Rollan’s hand. They all looked on as she devoured the bun, as if she hadn’t had real food in days.

The other children in the alley began to gather near them. Conor glanced at Abeke. “Give them our bags,” he said in a quiet voice. “We’ll buy more for ourselves.” He stooped down beside Rollan and started handing the food out. Rollan gave him a grateful look. Abeke followed suit, as did Maya.

At the sight, the hesitant children suddenly surged forward, their outstretched hands everywhere. Their silence turned into laughter, smiles, and shouts. Abeke couldn’t understand what they were saying, but their desperation was obvious enough. She handed out meat buns as quickly as she could, filling the empty hands. Still, more came. She realized that others begging outside the alley had gotten a whiff of what was happening. More crowded in, cutting them off.

“No more,” Conor said as he held up an empty bag. But the people didn’t see him, or perhaps they were too tired or hungry to notice.

One little boy pointed at the tattoo on Abeke’s arm. He glanced back up at her. His eyes grew wide. “Uraza,” he whispered.

Abeke shook her head quickly, trying not to draw more attention to them, but the boy had already turned back to the street. “The Four Fallen are here!” he yelled, pointing frantically at Abeke.

The words rippled through the crowd.

“We should get out of here,” Conor said.

They started pushing their way through the alley. The sight of so many hungry faces tugged at Abeke’s heart. If they failed in their mission, would the entire world become this? What would happen if the Conquerors won? The

thought plagued her as their group finally made it out of the alley and started heading back toward the harbor. Behind them, a steady stream of beggars trailed along, some chanting and cheering.

The Four Fallen are here to save us!

“We’ve attracted too much attention,” Maya said through gritted teeth. They surged on, trying to leave their followers behind. Still, Abeke thought she didn’t look like she regretted anything.

The farther they traveled through the streets, the more people flocked in their direction. Abeke didn’t think most of them could even tell whom they were cheering for – only that there was a commotion, and excitement, and a welcome distraction from the city’s misery.

She winced as someone bumped her shoulder hard. They were surrounded by a blur of faces, over which she could see a sliver of the harbor beyond. Too many people. Abeke’s heart began to beat faster, and she forced her rising panic down.

Something flashed past her line of sight.

An arrow hit the man closest to Abeke, right in the shoulder, and he screamed. The force of the hit sent him tumbling backward.

Instantly, the crowd broke into chaos.

Abeke dropped her barrel of water. The precious contents sloshed out and spilled all over the ground. Maya dropped down into a crouch.

“Forget the water!” Conor hissed. He grabbed Abeke’s wrist and pulled Rollan close, abandoning their remaining barrels.

All around them, people fled in panic, a blur of motion and colors. Abeke could hardly see in the midst of all the flying dust.

Someone had just tried to kill her.

The seagull that had followed them came rushing back to her thoughts. What if that was a Conqueror’s spirit animal? The Conquerors had passed through not long ago.

Another arrow came whizzing from nowhere. It hit a nearby woman in the leg.

“Go!” Conor urged, pointing through the mass of panicking townspeople. He ducked into the thick of the crowd and pulled Abeke after him. The others

followed. Screams filled their ears.

“Someone’s firing from the roofs!” Rollan called out over his shoulder. He ducked lower. Abeke did the same, so that from the air they were all but invisible in the chaos. Abeke fought the urge to call for Uraza – this was no time to have their spirit animals out, drawing even more attention. She gritted her teeth and continued weaving through the people. She thought she saw a glimpse of blood on someone, but the image flashed past her too quickly to get a good look.

All they wanted was a bite of food. How did this get so out of hand?

By the time the four made it back to the port, their assailants had vanished. They were all panting. Maya rushed ahead to let everyone know that they had arrived. Rollan stopped to lean on his knees.

“Well,” he muttered to Conor, “it’s nice to know that good deeds are rewarded.”

“The Conquerors must be hunting for us,” Abeke replied as she leaned against a wooden post, struggling to catch her breath. “I saw a seagull following us. We need to get out of here before they catch up to us again. We don’t have much time.”

Conor and Rollan nodded silently. They hurried onto the deck of the *Tellun’s Pride*, where Finn and Kalani waited impatiently for them. Kalani rushed over as soon as they were on board. “Are you all okay?” she asked. “We saw the commotion in the streets.”

“We’re okay,” Conor replied, even though his expression didn’t look like it.

Finn ushered them belowdecks immediately. Abeke nearly tripped on the ladder’s steps in her haste.

Dorian was waiting for them in the hold. As they arrived, he straightened and frowned at them from behind his maps. In the sudden dark, Abeke had nearly mistaken him for Tarik, summoning a fresh pang of grief.

“What happened out there?” he asked. His owl was perched beside him on the table, watching the team with its own sharp gaze.

“The Conquerors attacked us when we ... accidentally drew a crowd,” Conor replied. Sweat beaded on his brow. He looked suddenly guilty. The floor beneath their feet was already shifting – the *Tellun’s Pride* had just pulled away

from the harbor.

“And what were you all doing, to attract such a crowd?”

Rollan’s jaw tightened. “We passed through a narrow alley with children orphaned from the storms. I stopped to give a girl a meat bun.”

Finn shook his head sympathetically. Beside him, Dorian gave them all a stern look.

“Good intentions,” Dorian said. “But now’s not the time for it.”

Rollan rolled his eyes. Already, he looked like he was bristling at Dorian’s presence. “Oh, come *on*. We’re all safe and well, aren’t we?”

Dorian pressed his lips into a line. “We must lie low, and you’re drawing too many eyes.” His voice lowered. He looked at Conor, who hung his head.

“Remember, the fate of Erdas lies in our hands. We cannot afford to be distracted from our primary mission by small acts of kindness.”

Rollan couldn’t seem to hold in his irritation anymore. He scowled. “It was my idea, not Conor’s,” he snapped. “So don’t blame him,”

“Very well, then. I’ll hold you responsible for putting your companions’ and, indeed, all of our lives at stake.”

“If we can’t even bother to be kind to people in need, then what’s the point of saving Erdas?”

Dorian frowned back. “Your actions drew the Conquerors’ attention. Is that what you want?”

Rollan’s voice grew louder. “*Tarik* would have been proud of us, if he was still here! But he’s not. We just have *you*, trying to fill his shoes.”

Dorian winced visibly at that. It lasted only for an instant before it was replaced with his stern look, but even Rollan seemed to recognize he’d hit a sore spot. He crossed his arms and dropped his gaze.

An awkward silence hung heavily in the air. Abeke searched Dorian’s face for that vulnerability she’d seen before, but his eyes were every bit as fierce as his spirit animal’s.

Truly, she felt a bit sorry for him. How must it feel to have to step into *Tarik*’s shoes, to be the newest person in a group that had already bonded together over so much? She remembered that feeling well enough.

“*Balanhara* was our last dock,” Dorian said, his voice cold. Clearly their

prior conversation was over. “We won’t stop again.”

He turned his back and headed up the ladder with Finn. But before he left them, he paused and looked over his shoulder.

“Tarik and I joined the Greencloaks at the same time,” he said. “We trained together. So don’t tell me things I already know.”

Abeke watched him go. They remained silent for a long moment afterward.

Rollan let out a slow breath. His shoulders hunched. “I know, I know. I shouldn’t have said that,” he muttered.

Abeke walked over to Rollan and patted him on the shoulder. “I’m glad we helped those children,” she said. “Even though it caused a lot of trouble. At least they have full stomachs now.”

Maya and Conor nodded their agreement. Rollan still looked unhappy, but his posture relaxed a bit, and he gave his friends a faint smile.

As they headed up to the deck to watch Balanhara fade away on the horizon, Abeke’s thoughts wandered back to the seagull that had watched them before the attack.

Perhaps it was a coincidence.



BATTLE AT SEA

WHEN ROLLAN WENT UP TO THE DECK OF THE *TELLUN'S Pride* the next morning, the ocean had turned choppy and black. *Black.*

Not a normal color for the ocean, he thought to himself. He winced at the wind and huddled under his cloak. Everyone else was still asleep belowdecks, except for the few crew members manning the sails. He took a deep breath.

His anger and guilt over what happened yesterday had faded away into a sullen understanding. Dorian was right, of course. Rollan just didn't want to admit it. When he next saw Dorian, he would apologize for what he said.

Essix glided somewhere overhead. Rollan turned his face skyward, searching for her, but all he saw were churning clouds. It seemed like the entire world had been stripped of color. Even the whales pulling the *Tellun's Pride* forward seemed uneasy, blowing enormous plumes of mist into the air. Rollan grimaced at the ominous water, then squinted out toward the horizon.

It took him a moment to realize that another Greencloak was up on the deck besides himself. Kalani. She saw Rollan approaching and looked away quickly, toward the ship's bow.

"Good morning," Rollan said as he joined her. He glanced at the sky again. "Or not. What are you doing up so early?"

Kalani leaned over the railing, the edges of her mouth turned down.

Rollan sighed. “Look, I know that I’m officially poisonous to your people now, but if we can’t even talk to each other on this mission, it’s going to get us into trouble.”

Kalani’s eyes remained focused on the sea’s surface, and Rollan realized she was searching for her dolphin in the waters. Maybe she was still weighing whether or not to acknowledge him. When she stayed quiet, he shook his head.

“Fine,” he said. “I get it. But, Kalani ... this may be the last journey we ever make together. I don’t even know if we’ll all come back.” His voice lowered. “And if we *don’t* make it back ... do you really want our last days together to be spent like this?”

At that, Kalani’s stare finally shifted from the ocean to Rollan. She studied his face. He could see the conflict in her eyes. For a moment, he thought she might keep pushing back.

But then her shoulders relaxed, and she let out a long breath. Her eyes went back to the sea. “The whales aren’t doing well,” she said. And despite the severity of her words, Rollan couldn’t help exhaling in relief. They were talking again. “I couldn’t sleep because I could sense the distress of their underwater calls. So I came up here. Look.” She pointed to the quivering ropes latched to the whales. “Their pace has slowed. They’re sick. I sent Katoa to check on them.”

So the whales *were* behaving oddly. Rollan didn’t like the sound of that at all. If their whales were sick, they wouldn’t be able to make it to Stetriol in time. They’d have to dock again somewhere. But they were so close! No other ports lay between here and Stetriol – nothing but open ocean. Where would they go?

“We’ve got to be getting close by now,” Rollan muttered. Then he raised his voice. “Hey, Essix!”

A piercing cry answered him, muffled by wind and distance. Now he saw her – she hovered in a wide circle several hundred yards away from the ship. Her relaxed glide calmed him somewhat.

Between the surprise attack at Balanhara, his argument with Dorian, and now the whales’ condition, Rollan could use a moment of calm.

When he looked back at Kalani, he could see tears welling in her eyes. Down in the water, her dolphin surfaced, whistling and clicking for her. She held out her arms and called it back into the dormant state before looking at Rollan.

“The whales,” she murmured. “They’re ... dying. The waters here are slowly poisoning them.”

“Dying?” Rollan said. He hadn’t thought it would be as bad as that. The word seemed so final – the thought of their faithful rockback whales sacrificing themselves because of this journey hit him hard in the heart.

Kalani nodded. Her voice sounded flat and dead. “We need to cut them loose, if we want to save them. They need to get away from Stetriol to cleaner waters.”

Rollan pulled out his long dagger. “Well, if you need a hand in cutting them loose ... I’m in.”

Kalani looked at the dagger with a pensive expression. Then she smiled weakly. “Thanks, Rollan. And ... I’m sorry. I know you broke our customs for the good of Erdas, and that seeking Mulop cost you much. As a queen, I suppose I should be willing to do anything to save my people. Even become *tapu* myself.” She sighed. “Let’s go tell the captain.”

The last word had barely left Kalani’s lips when Essix sent up a shrill shriek. The sound penetrated the air like a knife, making Rollan jump.

“Okay,” he said, “*that* didn’t sound good.” He searched the sky to see what made her give a warning cry. But the surface of the sea was covered with a layer of mist, hiding whatever else might be beyond.

“Hey.”

Rollan turned to see Conor emerge from the lower decks. The other boy stopped beside Kalani and squinted first at the ocean, then up to the Greencloak observing the sea from the crow’s nest. “What’s Essix calling about?”

Rollan shrugged. In the mist, he could hardly make out Essix at all. “No idea.”

“Think you can see through Essix’s eyes for us?” Kalani asked.

Rollan looked back out at the ocean and concentrated. He felt the familiar experience of the world rushing at him, and the curious sensation of being airborne, of soaring over the dark water and through the mist. The air smelled sharply of salt and fog, and tiny droplets of water dotted his face.

Essix swooped down, then expanded her wings to their full length and caught the air currents. Rollan could feel the wind ruffling through her feathers.

Everything looked a hundred times sharper than what he could see through human eyes.

At first, Rollan didn't notice anything unusual.

Then he saw the faint silhouette of a landmass looming behind the fog.

Essix shrieked again. Rollan rushed away from the sky and down toward the ship. He jolted back into his skin, right as he lifted his arm in the direction of the land and shouted, "Stetriol, straight ahead!"

A few seconds later, the lookout in the crow's nest called out the same thing. As others began emerging from belowdecks, Conor and Kalani stood next to Rollan and leaned out to see better. No doubt about it.

Jagged gray rocks rose from the horizon. Even from here, and even shrouded in mist, the vision sent a chill down Rollan's spine. He could *feel* something poisonous here, in the very air of the place. It didn't seem like so long ago when they had first passed Stetriol by.

This time, we will actually set foot on forbidden land. Was Meilin here?

As they drew closer, the land began to take on more detail, until Rollan could make out some sort of bay straight ahead. The wind began to pick up, and white foam crashed against jagged rocks lining the mouth of the bay. Some of the rocks glowed red with lava, still fresh and hot from the mouths of underwater volcanoes. These were pieces of land just days old, with new lava still flowing over them. The red-hot liquid gave the rocks the look of a giant beast's bloody jaws.

"There's no way we can squeeze through that without wrecking ourselves," Conor said grimly.

"I'm not sure we have much of a choice," Rollan replied. Indeed, the Greencloaks were already busy lowering the ship's masts, preparing to enter the strait. A harsh gust of wind nearly lifted Rollan clear off his feet. Overhead, Essix had returned to circling the ship. Her cry echoed again.

"Why is she still calling?" Conor shouted.

The ship lurched to one side as they drew closer to the stormy bay. Now they were near enough to hear the waves smashing themselves furiously against the rocks. The whales pulled hard as the Greencloaks urged them on. Kalani winced, and Rollan knew she could feel their agony.

Kalani looked worried. “The whales are exhausted,” she said, “but they’re going to try to get us through. It won’t be an easy passage.” She removed her cloak and stepped up onto the ship’s railing. “I’m going to guide them, and then cut them loose. Make sure to hang on!”

“Right!” Rollan called back.

Then she jumped overboard, falling in a graceful arc and splashing into the sea. A moment later, she emerged perched on the back of her dolphin, hanging on to its fin.

Rollan was about to call up to Essix when he felt the world rush around him again. This time, he saw through her eyes to the ocean behind them. There, in the wavering V that their ship had just carved through the ocean, came the shadow of *another ship*.

A Conqueror ship was hot on their trail.

Rollan felt his chest heave at the sight. Essix had been trying to warn them of something else all along, in addition to the jagged harbor they were about to enter. Now she turned her head forward, and Rollan saw why the other ship was here.

Right in front of Essix flew the seagull that had followed them in Balanbara. He could see it now through the mist, wind blowing through its tail feathers. *The seagull*, Rollan realized. *The Conquerors were watching us*.

Essix let out a sharp, angry cry and lunged for the bird.

Rollan gasped as his vision returned to him, and then grabbed Conor’s arm. “Conquerors!” he shouted.

Now the Greencloaks were pointing at the ghostly ship too. The *Tellun’s Pride* lurched again, sending sea mist spraying into their faces. No question about it – the Conquerors were frighteningly close, hidden from view the whole way by the thick mist. They would catch up in a matter of minutes.

“To the cannons!” the captain shouted.

They all leaped into action. Rollan and Conor ran to man a cannon. They were so close to the jagged rocks now. As the ship started to careen past the first rock, orange light burst from the Conqueror ship. Cannonballs! Rollan stumbled and fell to his knees as the first one made impact. The entire ship shuddered. Greencloaks ran by, some to douse the fire, others to the riggings. Still others

were loading their own cannons. Rollan saw Dorian manning his own station while overseeing those closest to him.

“Fire!” Rollan heard Dorian’s order shouted over the chaos. A volley of cannonballs sailed toward the Conquerors’ ship, exploding in showers of splinters wherever they made contact.

Rollan gritted his teeth as he and Conor picked up a cannonball and staggered with it toward their cannon. Dorian’s earlier lesson with them rushed through Rollan’s head. He hated to admit it, but the instruction was about to come in handy. They shut the metal breech, then lit the fuse.

“Point it higher!” Conor urged as they turned it toward the enemy’s ship.

“I know, I *know*!” Rollan snapped. “This thing’s a lot harder to move than it looks!”

The fuse finished burning, and the cannon rocketed backward.

The recoil knocked Conor and Rollan off their feet. For a second, Rollan thought that the impact might have knocked all the teeth out of his mouth. He landed with a thud on his back. He struggled to catch his breath as he scrambled back up.

They were *much* too close for comfort. Rollan could make out the faces and expressions of the enemy crew, and even distinguish the details on the Conquerors’ clothing. He glanced wildly across the deck and noticed Abeke and Finn manning one of the other cannons. Maya leaned over the railing, Tini on her shoulder, and focused on the enemy’s ship. Fire burst from her hand, but they were still too far away for her to hit.

The ship shuddered again.

This time, they careened wildly. “Hang on!” Conor yelled, right before the side of the ship rammed into one of the bay’s sharp rocks.

Hanging on was useless – Rollan went flying. His back hit the ship’s railing, sending a shock of pain rippling through his body, robbing him of breath for an instant. The *Tellun’s Pride* groaned in protest. Seawater flooded the deck, soaking Rollan’s boots. The icy coldness of it made him cringe.

“I’m cutting the whales free!” Kalani’s voice rang clear and high over the sound of crossfire and crashing waves.

Rollan leaned over as far as he could without toppling right off the ship.

“No, wait – !” he started to shout.

But Kalani hoisted a long, gleaming dagger, leaped onto one of the whales’ backs, and ran down its length on light feet. The sight sent a wave of flashbacks through Rollan, of when Meilin had done something similar.

Kalani sawed through one of the whale’s restraints, then another. The ship lurched heavily, and another wave of salt water flooded the deck. Behind them, the Conquerors increased their fire. Kalani hacked at a waterlogged rope. Finally she cut through one last restraint – and the first rockback whale broke loose with a tug. The creature immediately disappeared beneath the waves.

The ship’s stern surged up with the sudden freedom, causing the second whale’s harnesses to snap. The whale spouted a tall column of sea spray into the air before following its companion into the sea.

The *Tellun’s Pride* was floating alone now.

More cannon fire. The ship shuddered, her wounded boards groaning under her own weight. Rollan squinted through crashing water to see the Conquerors’ ship sailing past their stern, frighteningly close. Maya leaned over the railing of the *Tellun’s Pride* to aim once again.

This time, her fire hit true. A ball of flames exploded upon impact with the enemy’s deck, in a plume of gold, blue, and white. Wood, metal, and Conquerors went flying through the air and into the ocean.

Rollan’s eyes shot to the unmanned helm of the *Tellun’s Pride*. Where was the captain? As the thought flew through his head, he noticed the man lying unconscious on the deck. *Oh, no.* His eyes darted back to the helm. The ship shuddered again. They would never make it to shore.

An idea struck him.

He nudged Conor and made a sharp turning motion with his hands. Conor looked toward the helm too. His eyes suddenly lit with understanding, and his lips parted as if to repeat aloud what Rollan was thinking. They both hesitated, knowing how extreme their plan was – but only a few seconds. Conor nodded without a word, then started stumbling across the deck with Rollan in tow. The two boys reached the helm right as the ship shook again, bringing them once more to their knees.

From across the ship came a piercing whistle. Rollan glanced over to see

Abeke swing her arms wide, as if to ask what they were doing. He made a wild gesture with his arms. “Abandon ship. Abandon ship!” he mouthed.

Abeke blinked, then immediately shouted to the people on either side of her.

Conor grabbed the helm and started to pull it toward him with all his strength. Rollan did the same, throwing his weight into it. But their combined strength wasn't enough to turn the entire ship. They clenched their teeth, sweating and dripping with seawater.

“Let me help you boys out,” a white-haired Greencloak muttered as he rushed over to their aid. It took Rollan a moment to realize that the man was Finn. Together, all three threw their might against the helm.

The ship turned sharply to the right – its nose headed straight into the enemy ship's side. *Suicide*, Rollan thought.

The two ships rammed into each other.

The *Tellun's Pride* sandwiched the Conquerors' ship against the jagged rocks of the bay. Wood splinters flew through the air. The impact jolted everyone off their feet. Rollan's head slammed hard into the deck. For an instant, the entire world blurred – sounds muffled and everything went dark. He fought against the encroaching blackness. *No, I can't lose consciousness right now!* High above him, he heard Essix's piercing war cry. She was trying to keep him awake.

Then he felt a hand grab his shirt and haul him to his feet. Conor threw an arm around him. “We have to jump!” he was yelling. “Can you hear me, Rollan? *Jump!*”

Rollan reached blindly for the railing. His hand connected with slick wood, and he carefully hoisted himself up. His feet dangled over the edge. The ocean churned beneath him, all darkness and fire and broken wood. *We're too high up!* But Conor's shouts rang in his ears, and he felt the other boy tug sharply on his arm. With a deep, shuddering breath, Rollan launched himself from the side. Air and glittering water rushed all around him, parting for him as he plummeted like a stone. The fall seemed like it took an eternity. Then he hit the water.

The icy cold of the sea knocked all the breath out of him. He floundered helplessly, not knowing top from bottom, where he was, or how to get to the surface. The distant, blurred noise of fighting, fire, and breaking of wood rumbled somewhere around him. Rollan had the sudden notion that this was how

he would die.

What would happen to Essix if he did?

A talisman bumped against his chest in the water. He realized that the Coral Octopus was looped around his neck. Rollan reached desperately for it. His fingers closed around it, and suddenly he could breathe. He blinked, looking around in the water.

Abeke was struggling nearby.

Rollan swam toward her. He grabbed for her hand, lacing his fingers with hers, and then turned up toward the surface and kicked as furiously as he could. He tugged Abeke with him.

They surfaced with a terrible gasp. Suddenly the noise around him was deafening. He saw the wreckage of two ships, both in flames, crumbling slowly into the sea.

Conor waved a hand at them from several dozen feet away. Maya was already in front of them, Tini clinging tightly to the top of her head.

Abeke spit water from her mouth, then wiped a hand across her face. She turned toward land. "This way!" she shouted.

"Hang on to me," Rollan shouted back, submerging again. With the Coral Octopus's help, he was able to swim without surfacing as Abeke gripped his shoulders, floating along above him.

Conquerors and Greencloaks alike struggled in the choppy waves. Some fought each other. A few screamed.

Rollan saw a dark shape swim by. Chills ran down his spine. The fish was hideously lumpy and discolored, with red-and-black spots. Its sides were adorned with vicious, spiky fins. It swam between the struggling legs, disturbed by the churning debris. An explosion issued from the Conquerors' ship, sending tremors through the water. Rollan could feel the heat of the fire, even submerged in the cold water. He didn't dare look back.

I'm so tired. His waterlogged clothes threatened to pull him under. But still, he kept kicking, kept swimming. Abeke hung gamely on to his shoulders. Muffled shouts came from every direction.

Rollan had no idea how long they were in the water. Somewhere up ahead, he saw Kalani swimming through the murky blue, hanging on to one of her

dolphin's side fins while Conor clung to the other.

Finally Rollan saw land underneath him. Moments later, his feet hit sand. He dragged himself through the surf, then collapsed onto the beach. His breath came in ragged gasps. Beside him, Conor rolled over onto his back and closed his eyes for a moment, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Abeke coughed up water nearby.

"Are you all right?" Kalani said as she hopped onto the sand and crouched down to them. Her dolphin leaped once in the water, then vanished in a flash of light to return to her shoulder. Around them, others were crawling onto the beach too. More Greencloaks fought with the few Conquerors on the sand who had survived the explosion and the ocean. Rollan looked on in exhaustion as the last Conqueror was finally defeated.

None of them said a word. They could only look back at where an inferno had completely engulfed the dying *Tellun's Pride* and the Conquerors' ship. Both were locked together and sinking slowly as the waves crashed them mercilessly against the rocks. Smaller fires dotted the water.

"Dorian!"

Rollan suddenly recognized one of the Greencloaks struggling through the sand beside him. The man collapsed onto his back as Rollan crawled to his side. Aside from multiple wounds and cuts from wood splinters, Dorian's face was ghostly white and his lips had turned a deep shade of purple. He trembled from head to toe. The exposed skin of his arms and legs was an unnatural color, covered with angry red welts.

Rollan looked up at Kalani as the others joined him. "What's wrong with him?" he said frantically.

Kalani just shook her head. "Poison," she replied. "From stonefish stings. If Stetriol's stonefish are anything like what I saw back home, he is in a great deal of pain. He must have swum right into one."

Dorian coughed, the sound terrible and raspy. He tried to focus on Rollan hovering above him, but he couldn't seem to see very clearly. Whatever words he tried to speak were too garbled to understand. Rollan struggled to say something, anything, to comfort him, but all he could do was stare. The vicious-looking fish he'd seen in the water returned to his mind.

Dorian drew one last, shuddering breath. Then he slowly went still.

Rollan sat back in the sand, stunned.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. Then, louder. “*I’m sorry!*” He repeated it several times until he was shouting it. Abeke finally reached for his hand and told him gently that Dorian couldn’t hear him.

Conor lowered his head and closed his eyes. Kalani murmured over the fallen Greencloak’s head. “From the sea we came,” she said, “and to the sea we return.”

Overwhelmed, the small group sat on the beach and looked out to where the ships had both already disappeared from view. No more people struggled in the water. No Conquerors, no Greencloaks. A small handful of their original crew had survived and made their way to the beach, but it was a tiny number. And now the *Tellun’s Pride*, which had carried them all so faithfully on so many voyages, had taken her last breath too.

Rollan swallowed hard. They made it to Stetriol ... and there was no turning back.



9 GRAY HILLS

AS THE FEW REMAINING SUPPLIES THAT HAD WASHED TO shore were salvaged, Conor gathered around Finn with Abeke and Rollan. The elder Greencloak had taken charge after Dorian's death. Altogether, their already small party now numbered only a dozen. Everyone else had perished. Conor noticed a few of the Greencloaks crying over the limp bodies of their spirit animals. A stoat, a blue jay, a lynx. He also saw a few animals fleeing into the underbrush. Spirit animals that must have lost their beloved human partners. The sight weighed down his heart.

One look at Finn's face was all that Conor needed to get a sense of their chances. The man's eyes were bleak, almost as dark as the inky ocean. He carried out the grim job of taking the old maps of Stetriol from Dorian's body, where they were still rolled up and tucked at his belt. Beside him, Donn hung his head and nuzzled Finn's leg in mourning.

"We need to head into the nearest village," he said to the small group gathered around him. He pointed down at the waterlogged map. "If there are any. There were once settlements on this coast, but that was a long time ago."

"What if we can't find any?" one of the Greencloaks asked. His voice was choked with tears. Conor had seen the man earlier, crouched in anguish over the body of the lynx.

Finn tightened his lips. “We have no choice but to find one. We do not have enough supplies to last us for more than a few days, and we need horses.”

“And water,” Conor piped up. “Don’t we?”

“Yes, Conor,” the man replied. “We barely have any water left, other than the canteens strapped to our belts. There’s no time to lose.” He paused, looking out into the churning seas. “But first, we’ll pay our respects.”

The sand was too wet to bury Dorian – and, it seemed to Conor, too disrespectful. Lowering fallen Greencloaks into pits half-filled with dark, icy water was no burial at all. Instead, Kalani and her spirit animal helped gather up large segments of wood that had broken from the body of the *Tellun’s Pride*. They eased their fallen companions onto the boards, spreading their green cloaks neatly beneath them. They placed small tokens on each of the dead’s chests. For Dorian, Conor chose the glittering tile fragment he’d found in Balanhara.

For the first time since they’d boarded the *Tellun’s Pride*, Conor called for Briggan. The wolf appeared beside him in a flash of light. His great head turned, surveying the tragic scene. He stared for a long moment, then lowered his head and leaned against Conor’s hand. He uttered a low, mournful whine. It seemed as if Conor could feel Briggan’s grief through the wolf’s fur. Uraza had emerged beside Abeke too, looking on, her pose subdued. Essix sat quietly on Rollan’s shoulder, her expression fierce. Rollan’s eyes stayed downcast in grief and guilt.

As Finn spoke words of respect for each, Conor glanced at Rollan from the corner of his eye. His friend’s hand stayed wrapped tightly around the Coral Octopus hanging at his neck. Rollan looked like he was holding it together well enough, but Conor could tell he was thinking of all the things he’d said to Dorian.

He walked over to Rollan, then put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey,” he said softly. Rollan startled, looking up at him. “We’re going to win this war. We’ll make Dorian proud.”

Rollan looked back down at the Greencloak’s still figure. “Yeah,” he replied, although he didn’t sound like he believed himself.

Conor wished he could see into the future, that he could have a dream that told him everything would be okay. But his mind remained clouded and uncertain. He’d always known their journey would be full of danger, but even

after the attack at Balanhara, even after *everything* they'd all been through, it had still seemed like they would find a way.

Now he wasn't so sure. What if they all died in the uncharted lands of Stetriol, before they could even find Kovo's prison? Before they could rescue Meilin? If the Conquerors had already swept through so many cities, and the lands were starting to shudder from the shadow falling over them, then what would happen if Gerathon and Shane managed to free Kovo? What would be left?

Nothing. The answer that echoed in his thoughts made him shudder. *Nothing would be left.*

He could not allow that to happen.

Finn's last words faded away over the final body. A brief silence fell over everyone. Then they pushed each board out into the sea, watching from the shore as their friends floated out across the water on the broken strips of their beloved ship. Conor murmured a farewell under his breath.

They belonged to the sea and sky now.



"I can see why they wiped this place off the maps," Rollan muttered. "Not exactly a dream destination, is it?"

They had spent the entire day chopping their way through dry, brittle underbrush and a dying forest. Now, as they finally emerged on the other side, they saw a desolate, yellow expanse of plains spread out before them, with a small village situated at the bottom of bare foothills.

Conor had to admit – Stetriol didn't look like a country that anyone would visit voluntarily.

"Hide your cloaks," Finn said to all of them. "Greencloaks will not be welcome here."

Conor and Abeke removed theirs, but Rollan hesitated. His fingers fiddled with the clasp of his cloak. Conor remembered that it was not Rollan's cloak, but Tarik's.

"Tarik once told us never to take our cloaks off to win favor," Rollan mumbled. "In Boulder City."

Finn walked over to where Rollan stood. He gave him a sympathetic nod. “Wise words,” he said gently. “But he will be with you now, cloak or not, just as you will always be a Greencloak.”

Rollan nodded. Still, his eyes stayed down. “Yeah, you’re right.” Finally he unhooked the clasp. The cloak fell to the ground in a heap, sending up a shower of dirt. Rollan immediately bent down, picked it up, and started shaking dust from it. Conor looked on as Rollan folded the cloak carefully. He packed it tightly into his bag.

As the first town came into view, Conor was struck by how gray and brown everything looked. A long, low wall surrounded the cluster of homes, but the wall’s rocks were chipped and crumbling. Some parts of it had collapsed entirely. The land around the town was dry and sparsely dotted with weeds. A couple of mules pulling carts of supplies waited at the wall’s rusted entrance gates. The animals’ hides were dull and dappled with sores, and Conor could see their ribs.

They entered the town quietly after the mules and their carts. The two guards stationed at the gates didn’t look like guards at all, Conor thought, but merely poor peasant farmers in tattered tunics and shoes. As the Greencloaks walked in, he thought the two farmers cast them sidelong glances.

Conor looked away and instinctively scanned the sky for birds. He hadn’t forgotten Balanhara yet.

“Don’t worry,” Rollan said, pointing up at Essix. “If any bird looks suspicious, Essix will make a lunch out of it.”

“Lucky, being allowed to keep Essix out,” Abeke muttered at Rollan. “I wish I could let Uraza prowl around, but Finn said it’s too dangerous for her to be seen here. People might pass the word to the Conquerors that the Four Fallen have arrived.”

Conor wished he could let Briggan out from his dormant state too – he missed the silent comfort of his presence.

Rollan just shrugged. “Now that you mention it, where are the Conquerors? I figured this place would be swarming with them.”

“Maybe Shane is already gathering their entire army near Kovo’s prison,” Conor whispered.

Faded tavern signs with the town's name swung in the breeze. "*Gray Hills*," read Abeke. As their small group wandered through the marketplace – or what Conor could only assume was a marketplace – the people walking past them averted their gazes, keeping their hats pulled low and mouths tight in thin lines. Once, Conor accidentally brushed the arm of a passing woman. The woman cringed as if he'd burned her, then hunched her shoulders and walked away as fast as she could.

Abeke stopped to smile at a little boy with dirty cheeks who stooped at the entrance of an alley, quietly watching them pass. As she did, the boy sneered at her, then spit in her direction before running off. She watched him go with her mouth open.

"With my remarkable powers of perception," Rollan said beside her, "I'm getting the very subtle hint that people might ... possibly ... not like us here. But it's hard to tell."

Abeke raised an eyebrow at Rollan's sarcasm, then returned to looking around the nearly deserted marketplace. "Why does everyone look so hostile? Like they think we're going to hurt them?" A few yards away, Finn and several other Greencloaks stopped at a corral to haggle over the prices of horses. "I'd understand if Uraza was prowling around, but it's not as if our spirit animals are out."

"I wonder if they can tell that we're Greencloaks," Conor whispered back.

The three made their way over to the corral. The owner, a man in ragged clothes, showed Finn his meager stable of horses. Even here, right in the middle of a business transaction, Conor could tell that the horse dealer was trying his best to not meet Finn's eyes.

The elder Greencloak handed over a small pouch of coins and came back with several horses. None looked healthy. They seemed to Conor not unlike the mules they'd seen entering the town earlier. He patted one horse's muzzle sympathetically, and it grunted in return.

As they led the horses away, Finn leaned down to them and said in a low, gruff voice, "Keep your wits about you. We're not staying long. The people fear us, because they think we might be Conquerors in disguise, spying on them."

"Conquerors in disguise?" Conor said.

“Apparently some Conquerors have been doing that to the border towns, to make sure the people stay meek and obedient. The towns are afraid of anyone they don’t recognize.”

Abeke exchanged a look with Rollan. “They keep their own people in a state of fear?” she said in a low voice. Then she glanced around. Conor followed her gaze, wondering with an uneasy feeling whether any of these townspeople were Conquerors in disguise, watching them.

Finn nodded. “Some have been whispering that a patrol of Conquerors came through here less than a week ago. We aren’t far behind them.” He sighed. “They took a great deal of the town’s few food stores with them, as well as precious water supplies. There’s not much left for us to purchase from anyone.”

The thought unsettled Conor. Without water, they would run into trouble in the Stetriolan deserts in no time. “Do we have *any*?”

“Some,” Finn replied. He looked across the marketplace, where two Greencloaks were tying provisions to the backs of their horses. “Not much. We’ll need to make good time. They say this village is the only one for miles.”

Miles ... with nothing but desert surrounding them. Conor could feel his throat turning dry at the very thought. If this mission failed, and they all perished in the wastelands of Stetriol, it would be his vision that led them out here.

Finn saw Conor’s expression and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “We all chose this,” he said in a lowered voice. “And we’re going to follow you, Abeke, and Rollan to the end.”

Conor straightened as much as he could. He lifted his chin. “Thank you,” he replied.

They stayed in Gray Hills for the night, renting rooms in a small, cramped inn near the edge of the town. Conor shared a room with Abeke, Rollan, Maya, and Kalani. Despite the fact that the five of them were all squeezed into the cramped space, the real reason Conor couldn’t sleep was because of the shifting colors in the night sky.

Sometimes it would be pure black, like a night sky should be. Other times, it would blaze scarlet, the tint of blood. As he looked on, the colors faded into blue, then an ominous brown. Conor wondered if they were visions – something only he could see. The sky didn’t seem to wake the others. Briggan, out of his

dormant state for the night in order to keep watch over Conor, kept his head turned up to the sky too, silently observing.

In the morning, the bodies of red-crested birds littered the streets.

No one opened their doors to greet them as the team checked their horses and left. The entire place had turned into an eerie ghost town. Conor shivered as they filed out through the town's exit gate and into the desert. Even though the land beyond was dry and desolate, he was still glad to leave Gray Hills.

As they rode, the land around them gradually changed from parched yellow plains to sandy red rock dotted with shrubs, the stone carved into rivulets where ancient water used to flow. Off in the distance, they could see the faint silhouette of the Red Mountains, a thin line of jagged rock running along the horizon. Their progress was sporadic, slowed down by the fact that Finn was constantly searching the maps for recognizable landmarks.

"Did your visions show you anything specific?" Abeke asked him as they rode side by side. "Nothing about the Conquerors chasing us, or the birds falling from the sky? The weird villagers?"

Conor shook his head. "The most specific thing I saw was a barren land and the trunk of some enormous tree. I know that Tellun, Kovo, and Gerathon were there. And all of us." He paused there. "Tellun was fighting on our side. I hope that means we'll encounter him soon."

Abeke's jaw tightened. "Some just prefer to stand by," she said quietly, "until they can't stand by anymore. Maybe Tellun's like that too."

"Did your visions ever tell us anything about oases in the desert?" Rollan muttered as his horse finally caught up to theirs. Sweat beaded on his brow. *That's a good sign, Conor thought. At least he's still sweating. If he stops, that's when he'll be in trouble.*

"Come on, Rollan," Abeke said, rolling her eyes. "We all had a drink of water a few hours ago."

"I *know*," Rollan whined. As if in answer, Essix called out to him from high in the sky, where she was on the hunt for mice and other rodents. "Easy for you to say!" he muttered up at her.

Abeke shook her head and smiled. She looked back and forth between the two boys. "In Nilo," she said, taking something small and smooth out of her

pocket, “we suck on pebbles when the water’s scarce. Try it out. It’ll stave off some of your thirst.”

Rollan hopped off his horse, grabbed a couple of gray pebbles from the ground, then jumped back up and polished them on his tunic. He shoved them in his mouth.

“Don’t *eat* them,” Abeke said with a laugh. Conor sucked on a pebble and watched their antics, grateful to Rollan for bringing a smile to Abeke’s face.

“Hey,” Abeke called to where Kalani and Maya were trailing them. “You guys want some pebbles?”

Maya shook her head. Her fire salamander was out on her shoulder now, hiding in the shade that her hair created. Its gold-and-black-patterned scales gleamed in the sun. Maya usually kept Tini in his dormant state, but sometimes she’d let him out to feed. Tini would scamper down to the ground to hunt for a few insects and worms, then dart back to her and happily turn dormant again. Desert heat was no place for a fire salamander.

But it was Kalani who looked absolutely miserable this far from the ocean. Her shoulders were hunched, as if she’d wilted in the sun, and she rode on with a blank, downcast expression. Conor watched her closely. Unlike Rollan, she had no sheen of sweat dotting her brow. She looked entirely parched. And listless.

“Kalani?” Rollan asked hesitantly.

“She’s going to faint!” Conor shouted.

Right on cue, Kalani’s head lolled to one side and she swayed in her saddle. Abeke jumped down and rushed over right as Conor called out. When Kalani started to fall, Abeke caught her. Her legs buckled, and the two girls crumpled into a heap on the ground.

Their entire procession paused. Finn came hurrying up from the rear as Conor and Rollan gathered at Kalani’s side. Conor opened his canteen and poured some water into Kalani’s mouth. Her eyes still looked dazed.

“Everyone take a few minutes,” Finn called out, then frowned down at Kalani in concern. She took another drink of water. Suddenly the spark of life came back to her eyes, and she broke out in a sweat.

“Thanks,” she said weakly to everyone gathered around her. “I’m not made for this kind of heat.”

“None of us really are,” Finn replied with a sigh. He squinted up at the low sun. “We should stop for the day, anyway. Sunset’s approaching and we need to set up camp.”

Conor looked toward the waning sun too. He felt how light his canteen was now and wondered how long they could all keep this up.

DESOLATE LAND

THEY TRAVELED RELENTLESSLY FOR TWO DAYS.

On the third night, Abeke slept curled on her side in one corner of her tent, while Uraza lay nearby, close enough for Abeke to keep one hand in the leopard's velvet fur. She was exhausted from the day's journey, and so very thirsty. Her parched throat kept her from falling completely asleep, and she would constantly wake up from half-conscious dreams about waterfalls and cold streams. When they first pitched their tents, Rollan had helped Finn set up a trap of pots and pans around their meager group provisions, and situated it in the center of all their tents. Abeke wished she could have a canteen of water from that pile.

Still, sleeping on the ground in the desert felt like its own form of relief, giving her a nostalgic reminder of village life.

Her thoughts wandered to Meilin. Was she still being kept in the hold in Nilo, or on one of the Conqueror ships – or had they brought her to Stetriol by now? If they ran across Conquerors soon, Abeke hoped that Meilin would be with them – even if she were commanded to fight with the enemy. Did she know about what Shane did? She must, by now. Beside Abeke, Uraza shifted closer and swished her tail, letting a low purr vibrate through her hand.

Aside from thirst, night sounds kept her constantly awake. Unlike those in

Nilo, these sounds were unfamiliar to her. There were hoots and calls that she didn't recognize, yips and yowls, the slither of something scaly on the ground. Sometimes she stirred, looking around. Then she would settle back down.

Suddenly Uraza turned alert. Her head pointed toward the tent flap, and her purring changed to a low growl. Her tail swished faster. Abeke stiffened. She rolled into a quiet crouch, listening intently.

There. A scratching sound, and then footsteps. Something was outside.

"Uraza," she whispered urgently. But the leopard was already on the move – she sprang out of the tent in one bound. Abeke leaped up and followed close behind.

They charged out into the open night, completely lit by the moon.

Abeke stopped abruptly, panting, her eyes darting around the camp. She didn't see anything. Everyone still slept, and not a person was in sight. She stooped back down beside Uraza, who was still growling.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Uraza led the way. They cut a quiet path through the smattering of tents before finally reaching the center, where some of their provisions had been stacked, protected by a circle of pots and pans that were supposed to clank if anyone broke through.

But the provisions were gone.

The sacks were ripped open, their insides empty. The paper-wrapped dried meats lay strewn along the ground, and the canteens were open, some still spilling water into the dirt. Abeke gasped out loud.

"Thief!" she called out.

Immediately, Greencloaks stirred from their tents. Finn was the first beside her, while others murmured and muttered in confusion, swords drawn. "Abeke?" he exclaimed when he saw her out there. He paused at the sight of a growling Uraza. "What's going on?"

"Look," Abeke said, pointing at the ruined provisions. "Somebody took our supplies."

Finn's gaze fell on the scattered remnants. He cursed under his breath, then motioned for the others to gather. Abeke tried to temper her anger, but her own thirst made it hard for her to see all that wasted water. Who would do this? She

studied the trap closely but found that nothing had tripped it.

“Huh,” Rollan grunted as he and Conor came hurrying over from their tents.

They all paused when Uraza suddenly tensed and lunged for something in the darkness. The charge was followed by a piercing yelp. Abeke blinked in surprise, then found herself chasing instinctively after her spirit animal. “Uraza!” she called out.

But Uraza’s attention had fixed on another creature. She chased after a blurry figure that made a mad dash in front of her, zigzagging in an attempt to shake her off its tail. Uraza pounced – this time, she caught the creature and pinned it to the ground. Another piteous series of yelps punctuated the night.

Abeke ran over to her. She arrived to see her leopard snarling at what looked like a skinny little tan-colored wolf.

Conor and Rollan came skidding to a halt beside her. So did Finn. He was the first to speak. “Well,” he said. “I think we found our culprit. A dingo.”

“A what?” Rollan blurted out.

“They’re like wild dogs,” Finn said. “But native to Stetriol.”

The animal struggled in vain under Uraza’s mighty paws, but she refused to let it up. The telltale signs of its thievery were on its face – crumbs of bread still dotted its muzzle. Abeke shook her head. She hadn’t even bothered to check if the canteens had holes bitten in them, which they most certainly did.

“Uraza,” Abeke said to the leopard. “We should let it go. It’s as hungry and thirsty as we are.”

Uraza reluctantly lifted her paws and let the creature scamper to its feet. It loped across the landscape for a while, then paused to look back at them. In the night, its eyes shone like two metallic discs. Then it ran off and disappeared into the shadows.

They made their way back to the provisions. The dingo had eaten almost everything. Now the only supplies they had were the small packs they’d each kept with them in their tents. It wouldn’t be enough for another three days through the desert. And they were already short on water.

Abeke sank down onto her blanket. She tried not to think about the inevitable, but the thought refused to go away. If they couldn’t reach Muttering Rock in the next few days, they would die out here.



The next morning, they all packed up what little they had and set out again. Abeke allowed herself a few meager sips of water. It took all of her willpower to not drink every last drop in her canteen. The desert had taken on a shimmer of light that hovered just above the dry vegetation, rippling under the sun. Sometimes, she saw things in the ripples.

The others did too.

“Are those Conquerors headed in our direction?” Maya once said, startled, her finger pointed toward the horizon.

They all paused to look. As the ground continued to shimmer, Conor finally said, “No. It’s an illusion. Let’s keep going.”

Rollan swore he saw a giant elephant in the distance, as big as Dinesh, and wondered aloud how he’d gotten there. Twice, Abeke made the mistake of seeing a small stream babbling up ahead. It seemed like she could even hear it. But every time they neared, the stream would vanish and all they would see was more parched land.

Abeke kept her attention focused on the nearing expanse of mountains. *Just a little farther*, she thought. If they ever made it out of this desert, she would drink an entire keg of water.

The fifth day.

One of the horses perished from the harsh conditions. They all looked helplessly on when the poor creature suddenly stumbled in its steps, fell to its front knees, and collapsed onto its side with a groan. Kalani reached the horse first. But even before she could put a hand on the animal’s neck, she was shaking her head. The horse shuddered, foaming at the mouth. Then, slowly, its body settled against the earth, until it used up its last breath.

They rode in silence for a long time after that. Abeke couldn’t stop playing the horse’s death over and over in her head.

The other horses weren’t doing too well either, and the entire group had resorted to chewing on the last strips of dried jerky. Abeke traveled with Uraza in her dormant state now. The sun baked her hair and skin until they felt hot to the touch. Her canteen had already run dry. She’d sucked on so many pebbles that they no longer helped anymore. Her eyes constantly swept the shrubbery

around them, searching for plants that looked like they contained water. She hadn't seen anything yet.

Wait.

As if the mere thought had given her a clue, Abeke's eyes fell on a small, nondescript plant a few yards away. It reminded her immediately of a plant she knew from back home in Nilo.

Conor saw her pause. "What is it?" he asked. He sounded half-delirious from thirst himself.

"There." Abeke pointed. "That plant."

"What about it?"

Abeke didn't answer right away. Instead, her attention stayed on the plant. It was a short, squat, ugly little thing, with swollen leaves that looked like little green sacs. Back in Nilo, they called it a water bulb, due to moisture that the plant carried in its body. This one was covered in brightly colored spiked leaves, but otherwise, it looked fairly close. She dismounted from her horse and headed over to it. Conor followed her.

"Careful," Conor said, but Abeke gave him an encouraging smile and stooped down to peer at the plant.

"I won't touch the spikes," she promised. "Look at those colors – they're probably poisonous."

She removed the knife at her belt and sliced one of the green bulbs off. She carved one end of it open. Wet, clear liquid dripped onto her hands. The others stopped in their procession to watch. Abeke stared at the liquid for a moment. It could be poisonous, of course – but at this point, she was so thirsty that she didn't care. They would all die without water, anyway. Taking a deep breath, Abeke lifted it.

She sipped the clear liquid.

Then she closed her eyes and drank deeply. *Water!* It tasted slightly sweet and wonderfully cool – before she knew it, she'd finished drinking the entire bulb. When she opened her eyes again, she noticed that the plants grew in a large cluster hidden behind dry, prickly bushes. Conor stared at her in shock. She looked back at him with a grin, and Conor's expression changed to one of delight as he realized what Abeke had found. They both turned and

enthusiastically waved the others over.

“Water!” they called out in unison.

Everyone set about filling their canteens and watering their horses the best they could. The water from the plants wasn’t much, but it was enough, and the mere fact that they would be able to find bulbs like this in Stetriol’s barren lands gave Abeke hope that they could make it across.

“I’m going to search for more plants,” she announced, then set off up the hill to find more clusters. They seemed to grow together, and if she found a few more at the base of the hills, they would be set for another week.

“Wait for us!”

Behind her, Conor and Rollan came running. Maya stayed behind to look after Kalani, who still didn’t seem her best. Abeke waited until the boys caught up to her, and then the three of them set out together.

“I used to survive on bulbs like that when I went out hunting,” Abeke said. “The thing is, they tend to grow in lands that have some underground water or tiny streams. If we find any more clusters of them growing, then we might be able to find a bigger water source.”

“Bigger water source,” Rollan said, still drinking from his refilled canteen. “Music to my ears.”

They covered the short distance between the plains and the foothills. There, to Abeke’s delight, they found two more clusters of the water bulbs growing. There had to be some sort of stream around. Abeke, Conor, and Rollan climbed higher up the first hill. The wind had picked up again, and the cool breeze it brought was a welcome change from the stifling heat. Abeke breathed a sigh of relief. Thank Ninani their luck was finally turning around. At this rate, they’d be prepared when they caught up to the Conquerors. Sure enough, Abeke glanced down from the hill to see the first sign of a thin, snaking stream. She laughed as they went.

“Look!”

Conor stopped so suddenly that Abeke bumped right into his back. Rollan smashed into her in turn.

“What is it?” Abeke said. Then her eyes settled on what had captured Conor’s attention, and her words faded away into nothing.

From this vantage point on the hill, they could look down at a vast expanse of flatland, partly framed by the Red Mountains. The nearest side – the side they now stood on – was lined with narrow ravines. On the far side was a strange, shimmering red rock formation that plateaued high above the ground, looking like a giant ant mound.

And in the flatland's center, between all of the formations ... were thousands of Conquerors.

ARMY

SO MANY OF THEM.

That was Conor's first thought.

His second: *We can't fight them. We have to go around.*

And his third: *Olvan's army should be here by now.*

"Let's go back," Conor whispered, crouching lower in the grass. All thoughts of water seemed to have escaped him. "We have to warn Finn."

"Right," Rollan whispered. He turned abruptly around and started making his way through the tall grasses. "It's a good thing we went searching for plants. We would've walked right into them. They probably have troops guarding all the passes."

"It likely also means we're close to Kovo's prison," Abeke piped up. She looked sharply at Conor. "Anything familiar to you out there? Anything from your dreams or visions?"

Conor furrowed his brows. Up ahead, the others had already quieted and turned to watch them running frantically back. Conor's persistent visions flashed through his mind – the eagle, the ape, the snake, the golden leaves. The cliff, the red earth –

"That red rock," he muttered under his breath. Then louder, "That rock formation we just saw, on the far side. I think that's Muttering Rock."

“Do you think they’ve freed Kovo already?” Rollan asked.

“I don’t know,” Conor admitted. “But we have to head there all the same. If Kovo hasn’t been freed yet, it won’t be long before he is.”

The three charged back to the others. Finn frowned at their expressions. “What did you see out there?”

“Conquerors,” Abeke said breathlessly. “A whole army of them.”

“And no Olvan,” Conor added, saying what Abeke had been hesitant to voice. “His forces are supposed to hold them off and give us the chance to go ahead.”

“We may have arrived before him,” Finn said grimly. He nodded toward the foothills from where they’d just come. “Show me.”

Conor took them back to the crest, where they all got down on their bellies to watch the massive expanse of troops arrange themselves into practice formations. It seemed as if they were preparing for a big event, and Conor had no question what that event would be. Maya crawled over to join them after a while. She sucked in her breath at the sight.

“There,” Abeke snapped, pointing out a lone figure standing near the front of the flanks. Her jaw clenched until Conor thought it might break. “Shane!”

Even from this distance, the Devourer’s enormous crocodile was clearly visible camped out at its human partner’s side, its mighty jaws opening and closing. Conor shivered at the way its tail swept back and forth, and imagined the wide swaths it was painting in the desert sand. He looked back at Abeke to see her hands were clenched into fists. The fire of rage lit her eyes, a rare sight.

“If Shane’s here,” Rollan added, his own eyes sweeping the scene, “then maybe Meilin is too.”

Conor’s gaze settled on the strange rock formation he’d seen earlier. Something about it continued to hold his attention. *Kovo*. He called Briggan out from his passive state, and the huge wolf joined them in a small flash of light. His hackles were already up.

“Conor,” Finn said, looking at the rock. “Is that ... ?”

Conor nodded.

“We have to find a way around this army and reach the rock without drawing their attention,” Finn continued. He gestured down to the formations. “I can see

some of their forces down in three of the narrow ravines leading onto the plain. I'm going to assume they've taken those, as well." He pointed to two more narrow valleys that fed into the plains. "If we want to get around them, we'll need to make a wide circle east. And we'll need to do it without our horses."

Conor felt a pang at that. He looked back at the poor animals, all of whom had already been in bad shape before they set out. How would they survive in the desert?

Finn saw his face and shook his head. "We can't take them. Where we'll have to go is too steep for their legs. They will die. And if one of them startles when we're passing close to the Conquerors, they could give away our location."

Conor took a closer look at the terrain. The way he was crouched in the grass gave him a better view of the lower plains than Finn had. As he scanned the space, he noticed a tiny, shadowed path. *Paths*. In fact, there were several branches of grooves carved deep into the land, as if some ancient river and its tributaries used to exist there and had dried up decades ago.

The resulting maze of winding paths had tall walls with strange, wavelike formations and natural half tunnels. The paths carved their way all along the edge of the foothills. They stopped short of where their small troupe needed to be, but if they could pass through there completely unnoticed, they would leave behind the worst of the Conquerors.

"There," he whispered. "What if we make our way through one of those river paths?"

Finn followed his finger. His brows furrowed in thought. "It will take us dangerously close to the troops," he finally muttered. "If we're found while still there, they'll easily overwhelm us in a matter of minutes."

Conor nodded. "Definitely dangerous," he admitted. "But it's faster, and it looks like smooth, flat ground underneath those wave formations. If we pass through, the shape of it should muffle the sound of our horses' hooves, and block them from seeing the troops." He glanced at the others for their approval.

Rollan didn't even hesitate. "The faster, the better. I'm with Conor. Meilin might be down there with those troops, and we need to save her as soon as we can."

Abeke seemed more guarded. "We *are* passing awfully close," she said,

more to herself than anyone else. “But if we pad our horses’ hooves, we can make them travel even more quietly. Conor’s right – the shadows and the formations should hide us from view.”

Maya frowned. “It’ll keep them from seeing us, true, but it’ll also keep us from seeing *them*. We won’t even have a warning of them coming until they’re right on top of us. We won’t have a second chance.”

“I can keep Essix out,” Rollan suggested. “She’ll have to fly high to stay out of sight, but she can be our eyes, and if she sees the Conquerors moving toward us, she’ll give us a warning cry.”

“It’s the best solution,” Conor said, nodding toward Kalani. “We’re not going to survive much longer out in these deserts, not with the state we’re all in. It’s time for us to take a chance, even if it’s our only one.”

It took him a moment to realize that everyone was looking to him as if he were the final say in the decision – as if he were now leading the charge. Conor blinked, taken momentarily off guard. Maya was right about one thing: This was their final stand. They would succeed now, or everything they’d worked toward, ever since they first drank the Nectar and joined the Greencloaks, would be for nothing. This was the final struggle for Erdas, and it fell to Conor’s decision.

Memories from long ago flashed across his mind – sitting with his brothers in green pastures dotted with white sheep, standing behind Devon Trunswick and meticulously buttoning his luxurious vest.... How strange to be here after once being a shepherd and a servant.

He took a deep breath and willed himself to keep his head high. “I say we do it.”

Finn nodded once. He didn’t question Conor again. “Prepare the horses. We’ll make for the path at sunset.”



Sunset seemed to take forever to arrive. The light turned red and purple, casting long shadows across the plains. Cooking fires began to dot the bush where the Conquerors were gathered.

The team finally made their move.

Their horses trotted slowly down the side of the rolling hills. Finn led,

followed by Conor and the others, the hoods of their cloaks pulled over their heads to blend them in further with the lengthening shadows. They moved in a short, silent procession. As they went, the landscape shifted, changing from bushes and dry grasses to red, sandy rock and bare, sheer cliff sides. The walls of rock kept them safely hidden as night fell in earnest.

After a while, the mouth of the paths came into view – its walls tall and curved into a wave formation. The sound was strange here, bouncing the faint thud of hooves against the curved wall so that it came right back to them, giving it an odd echo. A cool breeze whipped their hair and hoods back.

Conor struggled to hear what might be going on beyond the rock wave, whether or not the Conquerors had followed them. The formation made it difficult for him to hear much outside of the path, though. He looked up to the sky. Essix was flying so high that in the darkness, he couldn't see her anywhere.

Behind him, Rollan whispered, "We're doing okay. The Conquerors seem like they're all cooking their suppers."

"Good," Conor replied. He could use a little bit of supper himself, but he quickly banished the thought. As if in response, his stomach rumbled. Even that sound echoed inside the wave formation, bouncing back and forth between the high bluffs.

The darker the night became, the harder it was for them to make out where they were going. The path had started to branch too, forcing them to concentrate on following the rightmost course so that they didn't accidentally lose each other. Conor couldn't see the moon tonight. Soon they were traveling in almost total darkness, their horses picking their way carefully through the terrain.

Finn kept them at as fast of a pace as he could, but they moved slower than Conor had predicted. The idea of Conquerors being right over the top of the wave formation – that at any moment, one might wander close by and look down to see them passing through – made Conor urge his horse on.

The other thing he didn't plan on, aside from the strange echoes: the wind. The shape of the narrow path channeled the air in such a way that a constant blast of cold wind beat against them, whipping their cloaks out behind them in dark streams. Conor gritted his teeth against it. After traveling through dry heat for the entire day, the sudden shift threw him off. At least it made a whistling

noise as it went, muting their hoofbeats.

“How far along are we?” Abeke hissed from ahead. “It feels like we’ve been stuck in here for hours.”

Conor tried to gauge how much distance they’d covered, but it was hard in the winding darkness. He looked over his shoulder at Rollan. “Can Essix give you any hints?”

Rollan started to answer, but a sound stopped them all abruptly.

It was the sound of hooves against dirt, but not any of theirs. They fell into a tense silence – Conor strained to hear if it came from the Conquerors’ camps. But the noise had disappeared.

Then it was back again, even louder. This time, Conor could tell it came from the path far ahead that curved around a bend. A moment later, he saw the flood of light from a lantern wrapping around the path.

The rock formation bent sound so oddly that they hadn’t heard the approaching party. Kalani, riding near the front, only had time to draw her sword before the other party came clearly into view.

Meilin appeared first, her hand clutching the lantern, with Jhi right beside her. An entire troop of Conqueror soldiers followed. She stared straight at them, her eyes anguished.

“Found you,” she said.

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

ROLLAN DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK AT THE SIGHT OF her. He didn't know how to react. He didn't know why his first thought was of the last time he'd seen her, running away from them with Abeke in tow, her mind and body no longer under her own control. He had no idea what expression must be on his face.

"Meilin," Rollan found himself calling out.

She winced at his voice but held firm. Her eyes turned yellow, and her pupils dilated to an unnatural size. "Seize them," she commanded.

The Conquerors charged at Finn and the Greencloaks. Conor called Briggan out in a blaze of light, and Uraza came roaring out of passive state to attack the enemy soldiers. Rollan called out for Essix, who let out a cry in return as she swooped down – and then he swung from his saddle and started shoving his way toward Meilin.

She didn't look like herself anymore. Dark circles rimmed the skin below her eyes, and her hair swung limply with each move of her head. But one thing stayed the same – she moved in an elegant blur of motion, a whirlwind of attacks that he was all too familiar with, taking down a Greencloak with a fierce kick at his head. Beside her, Jhi reluctantly ambled at her side, protecting her as she went.

"Take them prisoner!" Meilin shouted.

Rollan noticed that Shane stood at the very back of the patrol, a dark smile on his face.

Shane called for his crocodile. The enormous creature emerged, tail thrashing, blocking off the entire path with its size. Rollan touched the talisman buried against his chest. If the Conquerors got hold of his and Abeke's talismans, they were doomed.

Essix dove into the fray with talons outstretched, her cry furious. She lunged for the Devourer's crocodile first, but her sharp claws clicked harmlessly against tough scales. The crocodile snapped its head around, jaws seeking feathers. The gyrfalcon darted out of reach at the last instant. The beast's teeth barely missed her.

Abeke and Kalani moved at the same time, with Uraza charging ahead of them. They attacked a Conqueror and knocked him hard to the ground. Uraza pounced up onto the back of another Conqueror's horse with one huge leap, and the soldier fell off his mount with a shriek.

Nearby, Conor and Briggan aimed for Shane's crocodile, Briggan snarling and trying to find a way around its snapping jaws, to hold the animal off from the others.

"Meilin!" Rollan shouted as loudly as he could.

Meilin paused for a moment in the midst of the fighting; her head snapped in his direction. There – he could see a spark of recognition in her eyes, something within that fought to break free of the cloud that blanketed her face. He ducked under a Conqueror's swinging sword and sprinted in her direction. If he could just reach her, if he could just *touch her hand*, he *knew* he could help her overcome the Bile. If he just –

"Fall back!" Finn shouted from the fray. Rollan's attention broke for an instant. The elder Greencloak pointed at the path behind them. "The way we came!"

The Greencloaks began to break formation, turning their shrieking horses around and urging them in the opposite direction. Rollan cast another desperate look toward Meilin. She met his gaze for a brief moment. *No. I have to reach her!* Again he started to push through the soldiers, but the Greencloaks were all retreating. Abeke grabbed his arm as she passed him.

“We have to run!” she shouted.

“But –”

Rollan looked again and Meilin was lost from sight within the Conquerors. The enemy charged forward, weapons brandished. Gritting his teeth, Rollan followed Abeke and ran with the others.

Dust flew up from the footsteps and hooves, clouding the entire narrow path with a haze lit by the light of their lanterns. The dust lined Rollan’s throat. He choked and coughed. His boot caught on the edge of a sharp rock – he stumbled, then fell hard to the ground.

Immediately he started staggering to his feet again, but he looked up and found himself staring straight into Meilin’s haunted face.

She looked like she was about to attack him. Rollan braced himself.

Then, without warning, she grabbed his shirt collar and pulled him close. The colors in her eyes shifted abruptly, flashing from sickly gold back into a humanlike darkness, her pupils contracting. “The next fork will have no patrols,” she hissed. “It’ll lead you to the surface. Go!” She released him.

Rollan gaped, but he had no time to respond – or to grab Meilin’s hand and pull her with him. She lost the battle in her eyes. Her pupils dilated back into big black halos, and her irises gleamed yellow once more. With Jhi at her side, she waved the Conquerors forward. Shane smirked in approval.

Rollan had no idea whether Gerathon heard Meilin’s warning to him, or how it even happened, but he knew they couldn’t stay on their current path for long. He turned and ran to where Abeke was dashing back to him.

“Take the next path!” he gasped at her, gesturing for her to pass it along. Abeke didn’t hesitate. She shouted it up the chain, and the words traveled to the rest of the Greencloaks.

She helped us, Rollan thought feverishly as they ran. But she was still under the Bile’s influence. Somehow, her willpower must be finding a way to break through the overwhelming control – and if that was the case, then surely there would be a way to save her. Rollan forced himself to keep going, instead of turning around and finding Meilin again. Getting captured wouldn’t help anybody right now.

They reached the branch with the Conquerors right at their heels.

Somewhere above the walls and along the plains, Rollan thought he could hear the sound of battle – the clang of sword meeting sword, horses’ thundering hooves, shouts of men. Had the other Conquerors already been alerted? If the entire army knew where they were now, they would have no hope of getting through in time. As they ran, Rollan noticed the ground gradually starting to slope up. He ran faster.

“Essix!” he shouted as he went. Overhead, his gyrfalcon’s familiar cry answered. He took a deep breath, then glimpsed through her eyes. An image flashed before him – the plains from the night sky, dotted with hundreds of fires. Conquerors moving in chaotic clusters. They looked like they were fighting. Rollan peered closer through Essix’s vision.

Right as their path led them up to the surface of the plains, Rollan realized that the Conquerors’ army was fighting ... Greencloaks.

Olvan and his forces had finally arrived!

Rollan blinked, returning to his own view, then looked on in awe as they all ran. Familiar cloaks flashed in the darkness, clashing with the Conquerors’ dark armor, their silhouettes outlined sharply by the fires. Olvan’s moose reared somewhere in the fray, his enormous antlers glinting in the dark. There! Was that ... a soldier wearing the crest of Lord MacDonnell on his armor? And there – Rollan thought he saw Lishay, the Greencloak who had fought alongside them in Zhong, and at her side was her late brother’s black tiger, loyal to her almost like her own spirit animal had once been. Rollan wanted to shout with relief. They were all here! Even a few Niloan warriors darted through the melee, their war cries joining the sounds of battle. They must have joined Olvan’s forces! He wondered if Abeke’s father was among them.

Then a figure flashed through the darkness that erased Rollan’s smile. Zerif. He caught sight of Rollan, and the corners of his lips turned up into an oily sneer. The Iron Boar was looped around his neck – even as Greencloaks on horseback tried to shoot him down with arrows, their weapons bounced harmlessly off of him. With a snarl, Zerif turned in his saddle as a Greencloak rode up beside him. Rollan looked on in horror as he slashed at the Greencloak with his sword. The Greencloak clutched his chest and fell from his horse with a sickening thud.

Another Greencloak galloped over to Rollan. He had several horses with

him, stallions that looked much stronger than the mounts they'd been traveling with. It took Rollan a moment to realize that the Greencloak was Monte, with his raccoon spirit animal perched in front of him on the saddle. The raccoon's hackles stood on end, and it hissed in the direction of the battle.

"Go as fast as you can!" he shouted as he flung the reins toward Rollan. "We'll cover you!" Then he waved reinforcements over and turned them onto the Conquerors on their tail.

Rollan let out a bark of laughter. Perhaps the tide had turned! He grabbed the reins and tried to swing up onto the horse's back. "Stop!" Rollan shouted at the horse. It only slowed slightly for him.

"Here, let me!" Abeke shouted beside him. She made a running leap, grabbed the horse's mane, and swung up in one fluid move. Then she pulled the horse to a halt so that Rollan could climb up behind her.

Ahead of them, the large red rock formation loomed close in the night. They could make it.

Then Rollan heard a familiar voice next to them.

"Poor little boy. Shall I force you to fight the girl you care for?"

Meilin materialized out of the chaos, riding alongside on her own stallion. Her hair streamed out behind her. At her back rode other Conquerors. When she glanced at Rollan and Abeke, her expression looked stone-cold. Her eyes flashed like mirrors in the darkness. Hearing Gerathon's words in Meilin's voice sent a chill down Rollan's spine. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I'll fight *you*," Rollan snapped back. "And I'll make you pay for what you've done to Meilin."

Ahead, another patrol of Conquerors had blocked their path, forcing Finn to pull to a halt. Abeke turned their horse to face Meilin. Uraza growled at Jhi, who stayed firmly by Meilin's side.

"Meilin, it's us!" Abeke shouted. "Look – I'm okay, I made it here with the Greencloaks! Come with us!"

"She's no longer your concern," Shane called back, emerging from the shadows behind Meilin to face Rollan and Abeke. Several talismans hung from his belt, clacking together against his hip. Shane wore one around his neck, though Rollan couldn't make out which.

Abeke fell silent. Rollan looked on in rage.

Shane stared at Abeke for a moment, his brows furrowed, as if he wanted to say something. Then he seemed to change his mind. He nodded at Meilin. “I say it’s time to take their remaining talismans. Don’t you?”

Meilin narrowed her yellow eyes, then kicked her stallion forward. “Attack!” she said. She charged at them, aiming for Abeke and Rollan.

Abeke spurred their stallion on. The two horses charged at each other. As they drew near, Meilin hopped nimbly onto her steed’s back – then, as soon as they were close enough, she jumped. She knocked Abeke right off the horse, leaving only Rollan astride it. The two landed on the ground with a shower of dust.

Rollan swung down from the stallion and rushed to where Meilin was striking out ferociously at Abeke. Abeke put her arms up desperately over her face, trying to shield herself from the onslaught, but Meilin still caught her now and then, her movements a blur of motion. Head, side, jaw, arm. She struck everywhere, far too fast for Abeke to deflect. Nearby, Uraza snarled and growled at Jhi, who kept her at bay with her enormous, deadly paws.

“Meilin!” Abeke shouted. “Stop! I don’t want to fight you!” She struggled to defend herself without attacking back, but Meilin bared her teeth and continued on. Abeke’s breaths came in ragged gasps, then sobs. “I *can’t* fight you!” she cried out. Meilin caught her in a blow to the stomach, and Abeke doubled over in agony, all the wind knocked out of her. She wheezed.

Uraza roared in fury. She tried again to lunge toward Meilin, but Jhi muscled her way between them, baring her teeth at the leopard. Essix cried out from somewhere above Rollan. She dove at Jhi, claws extended, but seemed unwilling to inflict real damage, avoiding the panda’s eyes and going instead for the thick fur of her neck.

Rollan lunged forward as Meilin raised her fist to knock Abeke unconscious. He grabbed her shoulders from behind. “Meilin –” he began.

Meilin whirled on him, knocking him right off his feet. He landed with a thud onto his back. Immediately he put his arms up to protect his head, but Meilin kicked him hard with her shin. The blow crushed his own arm against his face. Rollan rolled away, then scrambled to his feet. His arm throbbed with pain,

as if just hit with a mace. His heart pounded wildly. She could kill him here, if she wanted to. She wouldn't even have to try.

"I saw you fighting it earlier," he said. "You can do it again!"

Though Meilin's face was the picture of anger, when she spoke, her voice cracked with anguish. "Leave me behind," she sobbed. "Run!" She lunged for him again.

Abeke scrambled up and tried to grab her arms, but Meilin was on her in a flash, kicking her squarely in the chest and knocking her down again. This time, Shane joined in – he shouted a command at his crocodile, and the giant creature snapped its jaws at Abeke. For a second, Rollan lost sight of Abeke behind the crocodile's towering figure. Then he saw her jump backward and whirl on her old friend with a determined stance. Beside her, Uraza let out a roar. She grabbed her bow off her back and pointed an arrow at him.

Rollan tried to remember his combat lessons, but facing Meilin, he couldn't seem to fight at all. He sidestepped Meilin's next attack, but she drifted with him, kicking out at his legs in a quick flourish. Rollan stumbled forward – he caught himself before spilling over and then dodged Meilin's short sword by a mere inch. She whirled. He could barely see her through the speed of her movements.

"I'm not leaving you!" Rollan shouted as he desperately tried to match each of her punches. One landed hard on his shoulder. He cried out in pain – it felt like someone striking him with a hammer. Meilin's eyes flashed from yellow to brown and the huge dilated pupils shrank to a normal size, then back again – whatever toll it took on her to resist killing him, he couldn't guess. *How do I snap her out of it? How do I help?*

"Such a weakling," Meilin snapped at him. Gerathon's words. "What does she see in a street urchin like you?"

"Meilin!" he yelled as she stabbed out with her sword again. The blade nicked his arm, and he felt hot blood well up against his skin before he felt the pain. "Do you remember when I first met you? Remember how much we irritated each other? Do you remember how many times you saved me?"

"Why should she remember anything about you?" Meilin hissed back. The words dripped with dark amusement. "You are nothing."

Meilin lunged for him, and the tip of her sword looked like a pointed star as it thrust straight toward his eye. Rollan ducked, stumbling, but continued stubbornly on. “Remember my fever rash in Zhong? How you stayed with me when I caught the Sunset Death? Or that time we were journeying to Samis, when you stopped that thief before he could stab me?”

Something flickered on Meilin’s face – the old Meilin, the one he knew and cared about. Her yellow eyes filled with tears, but still she continued to advance.

Nearby, Rollan heard a sword clash with something wooden. It was Abeke’s bow against Shane’s blade. Abeke shrieked – but whether it was in pain or anger, Rollan couldn’t tell.

“Remember when you fought off the sharks in Oceanus?” he said. “Do you know how worried I was? How ... how impressed?” His last few words wavered and his eyes burned as the memory of their last journey together hit him. Meilin let out a harsh battle cry and leaped for him, as if to make him stop. He tried dodging her again, but she caught him this time with her fist and sent him tumbling backward. The impact knocked the breath out of him – for a moment he struggled just to inhale. Meilin lifted her sword over her head. Her yellow eyes flashed wildly.

“Don’t you prefer to die like this?” Gerathon’s taunting words. “By her hands?”

Rollan told himself to ignore it. “Do you remember Abeke? Conor?” he gasped. Then he suddenly dropped his hands. Meilin had a clear shot at him, but he didn’t bother to defend himself anymore. *I have to do this.* “You’re a *Greencloak*, Meilin! You’re one of us, and we’ll stand at your side until the very end. You’re our friend.”

The blade trembled. Rollan shut his eyes and braced himself. His hands clutched tightly against the talisman on his chest. “You belong with us,” he said weakly.

The blow didn’t come. Rollan waited. The sounds of battle roared all around him. Then he opened his eyes carefully.

Meilin stayed suspended over him, but she had put down her blade and now both of her arms hung at her sides. Behind them, Shane glanced over from where he fought with Abeke. His face was incredulous. “What are you waiting for,

Gerathon?” he snapped at Meilin. “Get the Coral Octopus!”

Rollan kept his eyes fixed on Meilin’s.

Her eyes were brown – a beautiful, human brown.

His lips tilted into a lopsided smile. “If you’re not here, who am I going to tease all the time?”

A laugh emerged from Meilin’s throat – sad, amused, relieved. She still looked like she was struggling, but she helped Rollan stand up and then glanced frantically around the battlefield. “Keep me shackled,” she said. “Don’t let me go.”

“I won’t,” Rollan replied.

Meilin called Jhi into her dormant state. The panda disappeared in a flash. Rollan seized the moment to hurriedly wrap Meilin’s hands tightly behind her back.

Shane saw what was happening. His face twisted first in confusion, then in rage. He turned to Meilin. “Gerathon!” he shouted. “What are you doing? Command her to attack them!”

But Meilin’s eyes didn’t change. They stayed dark.

“*Gerathon!*” Shane shouted, angrier this time. He viciously shoved Abeke aside and hurried toward them.

“This is no time to play around,” Shane snapped at her, drawing his sword. He paused in his steps when he saw Rollan take a firm stance in front of Meilin. Abeke pushed herself back up on her feet and joined him. She turned her fierce eyes onto Shane.

“If you’re so worried,” Abeke said through clenched teeth, “then come attack us *yourself!*”

Shane narrowed his eyes at her. He hoisted his blade higher. “So be it,” he shouted. “If the Great Serpent is too weak to control a girl!”

Suddenly Shane froze in place. His eyes widened. He winced, then clutched his head as if something had stabbed him there. A terrible gasp escaped from his lips. He shrieked once. Rollan watched as the Devourer’s eyes changed ... into sickly gold. His pupils dilated until they nearly filled up his irises.

So. It was true, then. Shane had drunk the Bile – and now, *he* had become Gerathon’s puppet.

Shane shuddered violently. Then, he lifted his head and looked at Abeke again with his new eyes. He smiled and hoisted his saber again.

“I’ll be ordered around by no human,” he spat.

Then he touched the talisman looped around his neck and roared. *The Golden Lion!* Rollan realized too late.

The noise echoed across the battlefield – a deafening blast that knocked them off their feet.

Shane mounted his own stallion again, then called his crocodile into its dormant state. Rollan’s eyes darted up, following Shane’s path.

Zerif waited several dozen yards away. Wrapped around his hands were the other talismans. “To Muttering Rock!” the man shouted. Shane kicked his horse, spurring it on. The two galloped in the direction of the red rock formation.

“Quickly!” Rollan shouted, pulling Meilin over toward their horse. Abeke struggled up from where she was and ran for her horse too. All around the plains, Olvan’s Greencloaks had mounted a successful attack. Conquerors were breaking into smaller, chaotic clusters, herded into position by determined Greencloaks. Far in the middle of the plain, Rollan thought he saw Olvan in the melee.

Conor came dashing up to them on his horse. He pulled to a halt and Briggan loped up beside him, his gray fur lustrous in the firelight. Conor looked from Meilin to Rollan. His eyes were very wide, almost wild like his wolf’s.

“Is she –?” Conor started to say.

“She’s fine,” Rollan huffed, out of breath.

Meilin screamed. Her dark irises flickered to yellow, and she struggled against her bonds.

“She *will* be fine,” Rollan clarified. “She’s holding off the Bile as well as she can.”

“Let’s get her on a horse,” Conor said. “We have to go after Shane and Zerif – *now*. They’re going to free Kovo!”

MUTTERING ROCK

CONOR URGED HIS STALLION FORWARD, IN THE DIRECTION that Shane and Zerif had gone – toward Muttering Rock. The vision and dreams he'd been experiencing for days now came rushing back to him: the bloodred stone, Shane astride the eagle, Kovo roaring outside his prison. Tellun's voice, ringing in his ears.

It is the end of an era. We need you here.

They would find Tellun tonight. Conor was sure of it.

Conor spurred his horse into a sprint. The others followed closely behind him. As the battle between the Conquerors and the Greencloaks raged on, Conor kept his focus on the enormous rock formation that loomed nearer and nearer. Ahead, Shane's and Zerif's horses kicked up a cloud of dust. They would reach the bottom of the rock before long. Conor clenched his jaw and urged his horse to go faster.

They reached the wall right as Shane and Zerif began to scale it. They went at a frightening pace, aided by the stolen talismans – Shane crawled across the rock as if he were a squirrel, his grip steady and sure, and Zerif was yanked up after him, sliding from foothold to foothold in a rush, tied to Shane with a length of rope. Conor swung off his horse at the foot of the rock and hurried over to the others as they dismounted. He and Abeke helped Rollan get Meilin off the horse.

All four stared up at the looming wall of rock. It seemed unscalable.

“The Granite Ram,” Conor said, pointing to the talisman looped around Abeke’s neck.

Abeke handed it over. “Go,” she said. “We’ll follow as far as we can.” She tilted her head at Rollan. “Essix can send it back when you’re up.”

As Conor tugged the talisman over his head, Rollan turned and looked at Meilin. “Can you climb?”

“No,” Meilin said immediately.

“Yes, you can,” Rollan pressed.

Meilin’s voice sounded frantic. “Absolutely not. I’ll only be a danger to you up there. I –”

Before Conor even realized that Rollan had his dagger in hand, he’d slashed it down, cutting the rope that bound Meilin’s hands in one swift movement. The coils fell to the ground in a heap, leaving her unrestrained.

Meilin looked down at her hands in horror and wonder, opening and closing her fingers.

“Rollan ...” Conor said. “Are you sure about this? Gerathon could turn her against us at any moment.”

“I said I’m not leaving her,” Rollan muttered, sheathing the dagger. Meilin’s eyes darted from her hands up to him. He shook his head at her. “And I’m not.”

“You should,” Meilin said again, although this time she said it weakly.

“No.” Rollan’s eyes were steady, unafraid. “I trust you.”

“We all do,” Abeke said. She stepped forward and squeezed Meilin’s pale hands with her own. Tears started to well up in Meilin’s eyes.

Conor thought back to when he had betrayed the others, and how they’d forgiven him. How, no matter what, they had to set their fears aside sometimes and put their faith in each other. He reached out and touched Meilin’s shoulder. He smiled at her. “Come on, Meilin. Let’s go.”

Meilin shut her eyes and her tears overflowed, spilling down her cheeks. “Okay,” she whispered. “Thank you.” She looked at each of them in turn. “For everything. I’ll fight Gerathon with everything I have. I promise.”

Conor glanced up the rock. “I have to go.”

“Be swift,” Abeke said. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Conor clutched the talisman tightly. Suddenly it felt as if he could see every

single foothold on the entire sheer rock side. He gave a mighty leap. The Granite Ram shot him up into the air – he landed instinctively in a spot where he could find footholds. “Hold on!” he called down to the others. Then he took another wild leap to another hold. Wind rushed past him. When Conor chanced a look down, a prickly sensation rushed up his spine. He had covered over fifty feet in the span of a few seconds. The others followed his path at a slower rate while he jumped ahead. He glanced up to where Shane and Zerif dashed. Then he leaped again.

A piercing cry rang out overhead. For an instant, Conor flinched and thought he would see Halawir flying overhead, just like in his nightmares. But the cry came from Essix. The gyrfalcon flew ahead of them, calling out a shrill warning. Conor looked up to see Shane wielding the Crystal Polar Bear. His eyes widened.

“Watch out!” Conor yelled down to the others. As he said it, a violent explosion shook the cliff side – followed by the sound of crumbling boulders. Shane had knocked an avalanche of debris down toward them. Essix shrieked and darted away from the cliff. Conor made a giant leap out of the rocks’ way. An enormous boulder hurtled past him, hit the edge of the sheer wall, and crumbled into smaller rocks. They barely missed Abeke, who managed to fling herself to one side.

More rocks came tumbling down. Conor leaped from side to side as Shane struck out repeatedly with the Crystal Polar Bear’s invisible arms, raining more debris onto them. “Spread out!” Conor shouted down to the others. He saw Abeke taking the lead and guiding them farther out to the right. More boulders hurtled down the side, smashing entire chunks out of the wall and adding to the avalanche.

I have to distract Shane. Conor jumped and climbed to the opposite side of the wall, forcing Shane to concentrate on stopping him. He coughed from the dust stirred up by the falling boulders. Halfway there, Conor took another flying leap, and then another, moving as fast as he could. But Shane and Zerif had the Marble Swan. With the extra burst of agility it would give them for their climb, they would undoubtedly reach the top before he could.

The thought of Shane and Zerif releasing Kovo from his prison spurred

Conor to even greater speeds. If Kovo escaped, all would be lost.

Faster. Almost to the top. Conor let out a yelp as another sudden avalanche of rocks nearly sent him toppling down. He gripped the wall precariously, his feet dangling for a moment. An image of himself plummeting to his death flashed through his mind. Conor clenched his teeth and pressed himself close to the rock wall. Thanks to the Granite Ram, he found his footing.

Shane and Zerif had already cleared the top. At least the rain of rocks had stopped. Conor spared a second to make sure the others were all still climbing, and then he made three more giant leaps. He lunged up with his arm on the last leap – and his fingers curved around the top of the cliff side.

Exhausted, he pulled himself up.

Conor yanked the Granite Ram talisman from around his neck and held it aloft to Essix. The falcon snatched it from his hand with startling quickness and carried it away to the others.

From the top of Muttering Rock, he could see the entire expanse of red and brown plains surrounding the rock formation, stretching endlessly in every direction. A faint sliver of sunlight peeked up from the eastern horizon, bloodred in color.

Conor pulled himself up to his feet. “Briggan,” he gasped, calling for his spirit animal. With a flash of light, the wolf appeared at his side, already growling. Conor’s gaze fell over the plateau he now stood upon.

It looked like something out of his nightmares, and yet also entirely unfamiliar. Red rock. Dead, crooked trees, so unlike the golden leaves he always saw drifting in his dreams. But what commanded his attention was an enormous stone temple standing in the center of the plateau, composed of a ring of towering pillars and twisted wood that looked distinctively like ancient, petrified antlers. One of the pillars was carved in the shape of an elk – Tellun’s image, he realized – as if standing permanent guard. Each pillar stretched high toward the sky, casting long shadows against the ground. In the temple’s center, trapped behind the circle of twisting antlers, was the yawning mouth of a pit. Shane and Zerif now stood beside this pit. Conor’s throat constricted.

In the waning darkness, he also made out the smooth coils of a snake, and the hulking figure of an enormous eagle. Gerathon and Halawir were here. The

hackles on Briggan's back rose, and his growling grew louder. Conor searched frantically for the mighty elk too, but there was no sign of Tellun.

Conor's eyes darted to the pit. It was huge and black, an endless, yawning hole in the earth. Around the edge of the pit's mouth, Shane and Zerif had arranged all of their talismans, each spaced evenly apart. The pit looked empty.

Shane met Conor's gaze momentarily. His eyes were cold and hard – and full of triumph.

Oh, no.

Kovo had already been freed.

A dark figure crouched in front of the pit, his body illuminated by flashes of lightning. The sunrise had lightened the sky, and Conor could now make out the beast's scarlet eyes. It was an ape. A gorilla.

Kovo.

Kovo lifted his fists to his chest and pounded it twice. He vaulted onto his hind legs and roared again. Conor couldn't believe how big he was – he blocked the sun entirely. Behind Conor, the others had finally crested the cliff and looked on in shock.

Kovo smashed his arms back down to the earth, shaking the entire plateau. His mouth curved at Conor and Briggan in a slanted smile. "Ah," he said, his voice deep, angry, and ancient. "One of the Four Fallen." He glanced behind them to see Rollan, Abeke, and Meilin with their spirit animals flashing out of passive state. Essix swooped down to join Rollan. "I am glad you've returned, my brethren. I did not wish us to part on such bad terms." He glanced in disdain at the statue of Tellun behind him, then back to Conor. "I've been waiting for you to arrive."

Briggan's fangs gleamed. Conor had never seen his wolf so enraged.

Kovo laughed at Briggan's expression. Then he turned his stare back to Conor. "Thank you for answering me," the ape said.

Conor frowned. His mind swirled in confusion. "What are you talking about?" he snapped back. He glanced around the plateau again. *Tellun. Where is he? He's supposed to be here!* "Tellun!" he tried calling out.

Kovo's smile widened. "There's no use. Tellun is not here, boy."

"B-but ..." Conor stammered. "The visions ..."

“Tellun didn’t send those visions to you,” Kovo answered. “*I did.*”

Kovo did. Conor’s eyes widened. They had traveled all this way not by Tellun’s beckoning, not to stop Kovo from escaping his prison – but because Kovo himself had called them here, deceived them into it. No wonder Conor had been able to see it even when Briggan was in his dormant state, even when he should not have been able to have such dreams. Kovo had been waiting here for them to arrive, *with the final talismans*. The realization hit Conor hard. *I should have known.*

“You ...” Conor began. “You brought us here to get the last talismans.”

Kovo chuckled once. His dark eyes glinted bloodred in the light. They locked on the Granite Ram hanging around Abeke’s neck, then to the Coral Octopus around Rollan’s. “Clever boy,” he said. “I hadn’t intended you to make it all the way up Muttering Rock. Shane failed to stop you in the plains below. Ah, well. No matter. The talismans are here.”

Foiled. Deceived. Betrayed. Conor felt so helpless and ashamed.

“Don’t look so disappointed,” Kovo said, still smiling. He reared up onto his hind legs again. “I will put them all to good use.”

Then he slammed his fists into the ground.

The blow radiated out from Kovo in a ring of dust. Conor fell flat again as the entire plateau disappeared in a haze of light. Through it all, Conor could see the talismans arranged around the pit as each begin to glow a different color. Their glow grew brighter and brighter, wider and wider, until the colors all fused into one. Conor shielded his eyes from the blinding light.

Then the light vanished.

When Conor opened his eyes, the talismans around the pit were no longer there. Instead, a beautiful staff made of what looked like radiant silver wood sat in Kovo’s open palms, gleaming under the churning black clouds. The top was curled in the shape of a shepherd’s crook, a silhouette that Conor knew all too well. Sparkling white lines ran down its length. Kovo took the beautiful staff and held it high over his head, then slammed it down onto the ground. The stone pillars and twisted antlers around him trembled, then cracked. He took a deep breath.

“The Staff of Cycles,” he said reverently, “is *mine.*”

KOVO

KOVO HAD SENT FOR THEM. KOVO HAD TRICKED CONOR. All this effort, all they'd lost on the journey to Stetriol – the Greencloaks at the bay, the *Tellun's Pride*, Dorian – had been at the request of Kovo, who'd expected them to appear all along.

“We have to get out of here,” Conor suddenly said beside Abeke. He grabbed her hand and nodded at Rollan. “They'll get our talismans.”

They only managed to sprint a few steps to the edge of Muttering Rock before Halawir launched himself from his perch. He reached the edge long before they could, then spread his enormous wings, blocking out the sky. They all stumbled backward from a blast of wind. Halawir landed near the ledge, his eyes fierce and menacing.

“Where are you going?” he said in a harsh, taunting voice.

Abeke backed away from the eagle's sharp talons, then whirled around to face Kovo again. Her friends reluctantly did the same. They were trapped here. Abeke's hand tightened so hard around the Granite Ram that she could feel it digging deep grooves into her palm. Her eyes stayed focused on the silver staff that Kovo held aloft. What the staff could do, she had no idea – but it held the combined power of every talisman except for hers, the Coral Octopus, and Tellun's Platinum Elk. What would happen if the remaining talismans fused with

it too? Already, the sky above them had begun to change again, the clouds rimmed with ominous purple.

A movement from Shane, who still stood with Zerif by the pit, distracted Abeke. He took several steps toward Kovo. "I've fulfilled my promise," he said. He stretched one hand out. "I brought them to you. Now, it's your turn."

A hungry light had appeared in Shane's eyes, taking over the cold triumph that Abeke had seen there moments earlier. Her hand that wasn't clutching the talisman now clenched into a tight fist. Shane was asking Kovo to hand over the staff.

Kovo cast Shane a brief look. He said nothing. Then he turned away again and nodded toward Gerathon. The serpent's tongue flicked out once, as if in agreement, and her scaly mouth curved into the semblance of a grin. The hunger on Shane's face wavered. For the first time, Abeke saw doubt there – *real* doubt.

"You're not worthy to rule," Kovo finally said, his deep voice rumbling. He didn't even bother looking at Shane. "Never speak of it again to me."

Shane's confusion changed to shock, then incredulity. Then, rage. It twisted his face and made him hideous. "You *promised* me," he snapped. "Everything I've done, all I've sacrificed." He paused in his rant to look at Gerathon. Sudden realization hit him as he studied the serpent's cold gaze.

"You ... !" Shane choked out, pointing at Gerathon. In the depths of his rage, Abeke could hear raw grief. "You killed Drina for *nothing!*"

Gerathon's eyes slitted as her mouth grew wide. "Not for nothing," she corrected him, looking to Zerif. "Drina believed that we served your pitiful family, when it was you who served us. You should have known, Shane, from the very beginning."

"You *coward!*" he snarled. "Forcing us to do your dirty work. You call yourself a Great Beast!"

Gerathon just laughed. "Careful, boy," she said. "Lest you value your life so little."

"You –"

"Do you know how painful death can be?" Gerathon hissed. Her slithering coils pushed her higher, and she stretched her neck up until she towered over them. "I can make you *scream* when you die, and this time, it *will* be for

nothing.” Her fangs gleamed. “Nothing but my amusement.”

Shane couldn't seem to fathom what had just happened. He looked from Kovo to Gerathon, then back again, as if expecting something to change if he stared hard enough. In spite of everything, Abeke couldn't help feeling a twinge of pity for him. But the pity didn't last long, not when she thought back to what Shane had done to Meilin, to how many deaths he had been responsible for ... to how he had made her trust him.

No. Don't. She forced her heart to harden and hate. *This is what it feels like, Shane, to be betrayed by those you trust.*

Kovo turned his attention back to the Four Fallen. He hoisted the staff again. “He who controls the Staff of Cycles,” he roared, beating at his chest, “controls the Evertree. The fate of Erdas. He controls *all*.” He narrowed his dark red eyes at them, focusing particularly on Abeke and Rollan. “You have lost! Give me your talismans. You have no use for them any longer, and I will put them to very good use. The world *needs* the talismans to bind together. Hand them over, kneel to me, and I promise you mercy.”

“Like you *promised* Shane you would let him rule?” Rollan snapped. “You keep using that word – I don't think it means what you think it means.”

Kovo's mouth curled up as he bared his teeth. “Resist,” he roared, “and I will destroy you all.”

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Zerif stepped forward and bent his knee to Kovo. He lowered his head. Abeke watched, stunned. An oily man to the end – how quickly he turned his back on Shane, now that it seemed all was lost.

“I pledge my loyalty,” Zerif said to Kovo.

Shane let out an enraged cry. Then he called on his crocodile. It burst forth in a flash of light, front legs reared up and jaws already open – Shane grabbed one of its spikes and leaped onto its broad back. The crocodile's front legs smashed down to the ground, shaking the earth, and they lunged for Kovo.

Shane didn't even cover half the ground between himself and the ape before his crocodile suddenly halted in mid-step. Shane let out a wrenching shriek of pain. Then he fell from his crocodile's back and collapsed to the ground. He writhed. Abeke gasped.

Gerathon turned her control on Shane, forcing him back onto his feet and toward them. Abeke instinctively looked toward Meilin. As she feared, Meilin's pupils dilated and her irises faded to yellow. She shook her head violently. The color of her eyes flashed between dark and gold as she fought against Gerathon's pull. "Go!" she shouted at the others. "Don't worry about me – fight Shane and Zerif!"

"Now," Gerathon hissed. "*Attack!*"

Shane tried to resist, but Abeke could tell that his limbs moved of their own accord. He fixed his mindless stare on them and lunged.

"Go!" Conor suddenly shouted.

He, Rollan, and Abeke surged forward as one, their spirit animals at their sides. Conor and Briggan aimed for Shane and his crocodile, while Essix flew ahead of Rollan and opened her talons at Zerif. Zerif called his jackal – and for the first time, they saw the tawny animal emerge. It lunged for them with frightening speed. Shane aimed for Abeke, but Uraza leaped between them with an earthshaking roar. She attacked Shane's crocodile with claws extended.

Something black and white flashed in the corner of Abeke's eyes. Jhi! The panda reluctantly stayed at Meilin's side as Meilin struggled against her bonds, throwing herself at Abeke with all of her strength. Her eyes were completely yellow now, her pupils fully dilated. Abeke jumped backward. Even fighting against the control, Meilin was a formidable opponent. She kicked out at Abeke, trying to trip her, but Abeke managed to dodge it and throw Meilin to the ground. Meilin struggled wildly, unable to stop herself.

"I'm sorry," Abeke said breathlessly, "but I have to do this." Then she hit Meilin in the jaw, right where she knew she would knock the girl unconscious.

The hit landed where Abeke wanted it. Meilin's limbs went limp, and her eyes turned dazed. Abeke set her gently down, then leaped up and charged at Shane.

She had just reached him when Kovo lifted his staff and pointed it at all of them. A violent flash of light exploded from it, engulfing everyone.

Abeke halted. She threw her hands up to shield her face. Then, unbelievable pain stabbed her.

BREAKING BONDS

ROLLAN CRUMPLED TO THE GROUND WITH A CRY OF agony. His muscles felt like they were on fire. His joints cramped up. *What's happening?* His head clouded with a tight, painful tingling, and for a split second he felt as if he wasn't himself at all – that he was a complete stranger, and his real form was floating somewhere outside his body. For a moment, he was reminded of when he had been sick in Zhong. His thoughts flitted away as confusion clouded him. *Who am I?*

Nearby, he saw Uraza stumble and fall with a pained growl. Essix let out a shrill cry – her flight turned erratic. She landed with a crash, sending up a shower of dust, her wings splayed out in agony.

“Essix!” Rollan managed to shout through his own pain. He tried to crawl toward her, but another spasm of pain lanced down his legs, forcing him to curl up in a ball. Tears sprang to his eyes. Through his blurry vision, he could see that Conor and Abeke had fallen too.

Kovo roared in triumph. He stepped away from the edge of the pit, his staff still glowing in his hand, and walked toward Abeke. *He's going to take the Granite Ram*, Rollan thought. He struggled to get up, but his limbs felt weak and useless. He could only look on as Kovo towered over Abeke, effortlessly shoved the girl's arms aside, and opened his giant hand toward her. Rollan's eyes

widened in horror. *He's going to crush her.*

Abeke cringed away from the enormous fingers as they reached for the talisman looped around her neck. With one vicious yank, the talisman snapped free from its rope.

“No!” Rollan managed to shout. He glanced at Essix’s struggling figure again. *I have to help her!* “Essix, come here!” He pointed to the spot right above his heart. Essix turned her head toward him, her eyes full of agony. Rollan wasn’t even sure that she *could* go into the dormant state after Kovo’s attack – but being dormant had to be better than letting her suffer like this.

Essix let out a weak cry before vanishing in a flash of light. To Rollan’s relief, she reappeared over his heart in her usual place. A small surge of energy rushed through him – for now, he felt momentarily stronger. Rollan looked toward the others.

“Use the dormant state!” he called to them.

Conor called for Briggan, and Abeke for Uraza. Each spirit animal disappeared in a flash of light. Only Meilin stayed unconscious on the ground, Jhi beside her.

Conor shook his head, as if to clear it. His expression was still contorted in pain, but the little surge of strength his spirit animal had given him allowed him to crawl up onto his knees.

Kovo lumbered to Rollan’s side and loomed over him. Rollan could only hold a weak arm up in a vain attempt to stop him before he grabbed the Coral Octopus hanging around Rollan’s neck and pulled it free. Rollan’s heart dropped.

Kovo had all of the talismans now.

The ape lifted the staff and set its point down on the ground. He tied first the Granite Ram and then the Coral Octopus around the top of the staff, using the broken chains that had once held them in place around Rollan’s and Abeke’s necks. As if in response, the earth shuddered. Rollan’s fingers raked through red dust, leaving long scratches. He gritted his teeth as pain continued to pour over him. There was nothing he could do.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Kovo said to them, although nothing in his sneer gave any indication that he felt grateful. He patted the staff in a taunting gesture, as if daring Rollan to come retrieve it. Then he tightened his

fist around it and turned his back. “Come,” he called to Halawir and Gerathon. “The Platinum Elk is all that is left.”

The Platinum Elk. Rollan struggled up as Halawir took to the skies, carrying Gerathon in his talons. Kovo disappeared over the edge of Muttering Rock, leaping into what seemed like oblivion to the ground far below.

They’d gotten away.

With Kovo’s departure, the skies changed color again, shifting from black and blue to an eerie, dark red.

“This is from my vision,” Conor said beside him, his face turned up to the sky with a stunned expression. “This was when I saw Tellun.”

But Tellun was nowhere to be seen now.

Zerif was the first to bolt. He scrambled to his feet, suddenly freed of Gerathon’s control, and called his jackal back into its dormant state. He shot a quick glance at Rollan. Then he turned away and hurried to the edge of the rock. Rollan wanted to shout at him. He wished he were strong enough to give chase. But Zerif was already gone.

Conor let out a groan nearby. “Are you okay?” he asked Rollan.

Rollan gingerly stretched his limbs. The sharp pain that had crippled him seemed like it’d started to fade now. The fog that had shrouded his mind lifted too. He gradually felt more like himself again. Rollan tested his fingers and toes, then pulled himself into a crouch.

“Yeah, I think so,” he replied. He got up laboriously. “What did Kovo do to us? The way my bond with Essix stretched ...” He paused, shuddering at the memory. “It felt like my arms getting pulled out of their sockets. I thought it was going to tear me apart. Was that ... bonding sickness?”

Conor shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe. But whatever it was, the staff must have caused it.”

They both went to check on Meilin, who nodded weakly at them, her face crinkled in shame. Jhi ambled over to her and nuzzled her gently. At first, Meilin couldn’t seem to bring herself to look at her panda. Only when Jhi uttered a low, mournful growl and nudged Meilin with her nose did she finally turn her eyes up. Meilin put a hand on Jhi’s nose, then hugged her muzzle. Jhi stayed perfectly still. Her gesture said everything Rollan wanted to. It wasn’t her fault. None of

this was.

Then they turned to Abeke.

But Abeke was already up and moving, walking past them with a grim, determined gait. She was headed toward Shane, who still lay on the ground. He'd looked so powerful while on the battlefield below – but now, after Kovo had cast him aside, he looked defeated. His eyes, flashing and furious only moments earlier, were hollow and empty. He stayed in a fetal position, his arms and legs limp.

His crocodile was gone now, back in its dormant state, and he made no effort to move. He didn't seem to care about his well-being anymore. He didn't even seem to notice Abeke approaching. Whatever spark of power that had driven him before was gone from his face, leaving behind something empty and forlorn.

At first, Rollan thought that Abeke would help him up, kindhearted even after all Shane had done to hurt them. But when she reached him, Abeke kicked him hard with her boot instead. Her heel caught him under his ribs. Shane's cry echoed out over the desert. He coughed breathlessly.

"Get up!" Abeke snapped. "I said, *get up*." Her voice sounded completely cold. Rollan didn't know what to make of it. He had always thought he would cheer the day when Abeke finally got her hands on Shane. But somehow, seeing her like this, merciless and vengeful, gave him little pleasure.

Still, it was hardly his place to say anything. So he watched silently with Conor and Meilin as Abeke forced Shane, swaying, to his feet. Behind them loomed Tellun's stone temple, as if the Great Elk himself looked down on the proceedings.

Abeke bent down and picked up Zerif's discarded sword, pointing it toward his neck. She narrowed her eyes at Shane.

"Come on," she said. "Fight me."

DUEL

THE LAST TIME ABEKE HAD CONFRONTED SHANE, THEY were at Greenhaven, and she'd seen him turn her kindness against her, stealing their talismans and running away like a coward. Now, as she faced him once more, all of his past betrayals came hurtling back, overwhelming her.

Shane hugging her with open arms in Samis, whispering into her hair how much he'd missed her.

Asking her to stay with him before they reached Greenhaven, claiming he wanted the others to accept him.

That twilit evening on the boat, when he'd confided in her about the loss of his sister and his fear of Gerathon ... and he'd told Abeke she was amazing.

All were false memories – humiliating reminders of her gullibility. Shane had deceived her into caring for him, sympathizing with him, pitying him.

Lies.

Abeke's anger rose with each poisonous thought. She glared at Shane's swaying, weakened figure, and then lifted Zerif's sword with one hand. She slapped Shane in his side with the dull edge. He winced, hissing in pain through his teeth.

"I'm not going to tie you down," she said furiously, "because you are already weak. I don't need to bind an enemy who's as cowardly as you." She

slapped him again with the sword. “Come on. Are you scared now? Hanging your head, now that you’ve been left behind?”

Shane circled her warily while the others looked on, their uncertainty clearly written on their faces. None of Abeke’s friends seemed quite sure what to do. But Abeke didn’t pay attention to their hesitation. She barely heard them call out her name. All she saw before her was Shane.

“Abeke,” Shane said, steering clear of the range of her sword. “I’m sorry. You don’t understand how hard it’s been for me –”

The tragedy in his voice made Abeke’s anger boil over. She screamed and lunged at him. Shane tried in vain to dodge it, but the blade of her sword glanced off his shoulder, leaving a blooming red stain. He winced and hobbled away.

“I still remember when you sparred with me for the very first time,” Abeke said as she started circling again. Her hand was trembling now. “You had a pretend-assassin attack you during the match, so I’d think that it was real. I was so sure of you – even after you’d already lied to me!” The memory came back to her with stinging clarity. How ironic, she thought, that their first session was a harbinger of the betrayals to come. Abeke gritted her teeth and struck out again.

“Abeke, please!” Shane shouted as he dodged. “Listen to me!”

“Why should I?” Abeke shouted back. “You’re the Devourer! You tried to kill all of us!” Her voice grew louder and louder, until it was raw with her heartbreak. “I trusted you! *I defended you! How could you?*”

“You summoned *Uraza!*” Shane suddenly spat. He sounded furious now. Abeke was almost taken aback. “Do you ever think about that? You didn’t *choose* for your spirit animal to be one of the Four Fallen – you were *handed* a *hero’s* choice. How easy that is for you! What about me? Do you think I had a choice?”

“You always have a choice!”

“What if you had been me?” Shane pressed on. “What if you were the crown prince of an island prison – a nation *condemned* by the Greencloaks for the crimes of their ancestors? What would *you* do?”

He’s baiting you again, Abeke thought. *He’s good at it.* She steeled herself against his words as she attacked again, purposely using the same move she’d used on him during their very first training session together. Her hands were

shaking, despite her best efforts to steady them.

Shane stumbled backward, still talking. “I watched the bonding sickness destroy my mother and father, and turn my sister into someone I didn’t recognize. Did *you* ever have to go through that? Spirit animals were a *curse* in Stetriol! The Greencloaks decided we weren’t worthy of their precious Nectar. So they abandoned us without a second thought. Did they abandon *you*? Did you have *any* idea that Stetriol even existed?”

Abeke sliced at him again with her sword, catching him this time in his side. He winced and gritted his teeth. “Then my family was approached by Zerif, who brought us the secret location of Gerathon’s talisman. With it came the Bile – the only cure for bonding sickness that we’d *ever* seen.” His voice grew louder. “Don’t you understand? I thought I was saving my people, Abeke! I truly, honestly thought –”

Abeke growled. She charged Shane with Zerif’s sword pointed forward.

To her surprise, Shane paused. His tense stance suddenly relaxed, and he shook his head. “Just do it,” he murmured. Then he held both of his arms out to either side, leaving himself completely open for Abeke to attack.

Abeke couldn’t stop – she twisted the sword at the last moment, striking him hard in the chest with the pommel. The impact knocked him off his feet. He fell to the ground without even a cry. Abeke stood over him, breathing hard.

Shane coughed. He kept his head bowed this time, and his hair fell over his face. “I thought ...” He trailed off for a second. “I wanted to be worthy. It’s so easy for you to feel that way. You were chosen for greatness. What about the rest of us? I only wanted the same.”

To Abeke’s dismay, she felt her heart waver. She narrowed her eyes.

Shane finally looked up at her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry, Abeke. For everything. You meant so much to me – you were my only true friend. I remember everything about you ever since we first met. It killed me to have to betray you, because I didn’t want to lose you. I sacrificed so much ... my sister ...” He winced visibly. “But I had no choice. I’m bound to the Bile, just as helplessly as your friend Meilin.”

Don’t. Abeke closed her eyes and pushed his words out of her head. She thought back to Shane’s cold eyes, the way he had violated their trust at

Greenhaven and imprisoned Meilin. All of the horrible things he'd done. How did he manage to sway her like this every time? *What's wrong with me?*

Abeke lowered her sword. The fight had suddenly gone out of her, but when she spoke again, her voice still came out cold.

"Well, I'm sorry too, because you mean nothing to *me*," Abeke said to Shane.

Shane opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again. He stared at her for a long moment. Finally he looked away. His mouth tightened into a line.

Conor appeared with a bit of rope, and Abeke looked at him gratefully. He tied Shane's arms tightly behind his back. Shane didn't bother to struggle.

As Conor dragged Shane to his feet, the ground began to tremble again. Abeke paused, then looked to Conor, who had focused all of his attention on the shifting sky. A great wind whipped at them, pushing the clouds westward and stretching them into long dark streaks.

At first, Abeke thought that the shaking earth might be an earthquake. But as it went on, she realized that it felt less like an earthquake than it did ... footsteps. Deep, mighty footsteps. She glanced at Shane in case he was up to something, but he seemed as startled as she was.

Conor was the one who looked toward the towering circular stone temple surrounding Kovo's prison, where a strange glow had begun to emerge from the empty recesses of the prison.

"What is it?" Abeke asked.

Conor didn't turn to look at her, but his voice sounded hushed with reverence. "He's here," he replied.

The ground shook with each thundering footstep. The sound seemed to come from everywhere at once. Abeke's eyes widened as she saw the pillars and antlers start to crumble. One pillar fell against another, toppling it, setting off a chain reaction that sent the stones crashing to the ground. The antlers, too, broke into pieces and rained down.

A blinding flash of light engulfed them for an instant. Abeke shielded her eyes with her arms. When she opened them again, something stood before the destroyed temple. Her mouth dropped.

It was an enormous elk. His fur did not look brown, as Abeke had imagined

it, but instead glittered gold and silver and white. His majestic antlers branched toward the sky, and his head was lifted in a regal stance. Wind gusted all around him, but he seemed untouched by it. He walked slowly toward them. Each time his hooves hit the earth, the ground trembled.

Hanging from within the cage of his antlers shone a heavy, round talisman made from platinum, forged in the figure of an elk, its own antlers molding into the shape of the sun around it.

What captured Abeke most of all were the Great Elk's eyes – they seemed dark at first glance, but when she continued to stare, she could see red and gold, fire and earth and wind and sky, like looking into the soul of the land itself. A shudder went through her.

Tellun had arrived.

TELLUN

TELLUN WAS, BY FAR, THE LARGEST OF ALL THE GREAT Beasts. Rollan fell to his knees before the mighty elk, unable to look away. For once, he was at a loss for words.

“Tellun,” Conor gasped out nearby.

The elk looked back at them in silence. Rollan could hardly bear his gaze – it was the gaze of something that had walked the earth far, far longer than Rollan ever had, that had seen the ages come and go. He swallowed hard. “Essix,” he whispered, calling her out of the dormant state. *She needs to see this.* With a flash of light, Essix reappeared and flew toward the temple ruins with a cry that sounded to Rollan like surprise. Nearby, Conor and Abeke released Briggan and Uraza. Both crouched before Tellun, silent and still.

Tellun’s eyes finally fell upon Meilin’s figure, where she lay wincing from Abeke’s earlier blow. Then he looked toward Shane. The elk bowed his head once. His antlers seemed lit from within by an ethereal fire.

Meilin and Shane let out a simultaneous gasp.

“Meilin!” Rollan shouted automatically, rushing toward her. The gasp sounded like one of terrible pain. But when he reached her, it was as if the fog that had clouded her eyes was suddenly gone.

“Meilin?” he said again, hesitantly this time.

Meilin blinked, unsure of herself. She frowned. Then she glanced at Tellun with awe. She held up her hands, studying them, and started to laugh.

“It’s gone!” she exclaimed, looking at Rollan and then at the others. Her face glowed with joy.

“Gone?” Abeke said, breaking into a grin. “You mean – the Bile?”

An incredulous laugh escaped Meilin. “I think the Bile is completely gone. I don’t know how I know, but ... I can’t feel it anymore!” Beside her, Jhi made a happy, grunting sound in her throat.

Rollan stared in shock. It wasn’t until Tellun inclined his head toward them that he broke into a grin and let out a whoop. Conor and Abeke rushed over and wrapped Meilin in a giant hug. She threw her head back and laughed. The sound filled Rollan’s heart with light – how long it’d been since he’d heard her laugh like this! He laughed along with her as they all hugged. Behind them, Tellun looked calmly on.

“I can’t believe you’re back,” Rollan exclaimed as Meilin paused in her laughter long enough to look at him. He raised a mischievous eyebrow at her. “I’ve really missed making fun of you all the time.”

Meilin punched his arm in mock protest. Rollan laughed, then threw his arms around her and hugged her fiercely. She hugged him back. A weight lifted off his chest, and for an instant, Rollan forgot everything they still had to accomplish. This moment, at least, was perfect.

He pulled away long enough to kiss her right on the lips.

It took him a second to realize what just happened. The two jumped away from each other. Meilin’s eyes widened. Rollan flushed red from head to toe. What was he thinking? It seemed like such a natural gesture that he could barely remember what made him do it.

“I-I’m sorry,” he started to stammer out. “I just –”

Then Meilin smiled. She fiddled with the sash at her waist. “I missed you too,” she said, suddenly shy. She started to laugh again, and Rollan did too, running a hand bashfully through his hair. For once, he had no good joke ready. Beside them, Conor and Abeke looked on with amused expressions. Even Essix, who stayed perched on the ruins of the temple, fluffed her neck feathers up into a quizzical appearance and chirped. Jhi just looked as serene as always.

Shane stood apart from the group, head bowed silently, with his hands tied behind him. Rollan couldn't read his expression, but it was obvious that the Bile had been lifted from him too. When he thought no one was looking, he lifted his head to the sky, closed his eyes, and breathed in deeply ... as if for the first time.

"We have to stop Kovo," Conor said as they now turned back to Tellun. "He has all of our talismans now. The only one he doesn't have is yours." At that, he nodded at the Platinum Elk. "We have no idea where he's gone."

Tellun towered over them all, his antlers catching the light. "Kovo seeks the birthplace of all life," he replied in a deep, echoing rumble.

"The ... birthplace of all life?" Meilin asked. Her hand was entwined with Rollan's.

Tellun bowed his head once. Then he turned to look north, searching for something far beyond the horizon. "The Evertree."

The word itself sent an electric shudder through Rollan, a strange tremor, as if the very earth had spoken. "The Evertree?" Rollan whispered. Somehow, he felt it was a word meant to be whispered, something ancient and sacred.

Tellun took a single step closer to them. "When the world was very new, there existed only the sky, the water, the air, and the earth. From this new world emerged the Evertree. Some say her seed was a falling star, while others say it was forged in the mountains by the heat of the world. Her branches reached up to the heavens and her roots burrowed deep into the soil of the land. Through those roots, she breathed life into the world. The Great Beasts and our talismans were born from the Evertree. Each of us protects part of her power; it is why we guard our talismans so fiercely. The Evertree is our mother, the source of the bond between man and animal, the very soul of us – and of all living creatures. Of *you*."

Tellun paused to bow his head in reverence. A tragic note entered his voice. "You have all now felt the earth shudder – the storms in Greenhaven, the poisoning of the seas, the blizzards in Nilo. The Evertree's roots are connected deeply to the balance of life. As she trembles from the approach of darkness and destruction, so does the entire world tremble."

So that was why the world had seen such imbalance lately. Rollan tried to imagine what a life-giving tree would look like. "And Kovo is heading there

now?” he asked. “What will happen once he reaches it?”

Tellun lowered his head in respect to Jhi, Briggan, Essix, and Uraza. “The Evertree was wounded during the last great war. Her soul was injured by Kovo, with a staff made of only half of our talismans. This was before the Four Fallen gave their lives to protect Erdas. She has never healed. This injury is what gave rise to the bonding sickness. Now, Kovo has another Staff of Cycles, far more complete than his last one. Even without my talisman, the staff will give him the power to call all of the Great Beasts to the Evertree. If he obtains mine as well, then the staff will give him the power to control every living being in Erdas. He will rule over all.”

Kovo, ruling Erdas. Rollan shivered.

To his surprise, Tellun shook his head so that the Platinum Elk slid to hang on one of his antlers. He pointed his antlers at Conor, waiting for him to take the talisman. “I entrust you all, and the Four Fallen, with my talisman. It will be drawn to the others, just as we are being called to the Evertree by Kovo. I can feel the pull already. Should something happen to me, I want to know that the talisman lies in your grasp, not mine. Kovo’s power is not something to underestimate. We must stop him now, or he will control all of us.”

Conor reached out in the silence and took the talisman from Tellun’s antlers. Rollan stared at it, wondering what would befall them now.

Tellun met the gazes of the Four Fallen again. “The balance among the Great Beasts has been shaken forever. There is no going back.” He closed his eyes. “Our time may be coming to an end.”

Conor’s prophetic words came back to Rollan in a flash. *Our spirit animals may not survive this war.* The thought of ending his bond with Essix was so overwhelming that Rollan wanted to double over in pain. As Tellun’s words sunk in for everyone, the sky continued to shift. Lightning streaked quietly along the horizon, warning of a distant storm, and an electric tension hung in the air. What little of the morning sun that had shone was now entirely covered by clouds.

Tellun lifted his head and sniffed the air once. “Kovo is calling,” he said. “He is summoning the Great Beasts to the Evertree now.”

REDEMPTION

WHEN MEILIN HAD FIRST BEEN AFFLICTED BY THE BILE, its chains had been so insidious that she didn't even know they were there, tying her to Gerathon. But now that Tellun had freed her, she felt as if she'd taken a deep breath of the freshest air. Like she had dived into a cool, crystal clear lake.

And then Rollan had kissed her. *A real kiss.*

It'd lasted barely a second, but she couldn't stop blushing and smiling, in spite of everything.

Only when Tellun said that the Great Beasts' time might be coming to an end did her smile waver. She took a step closer to her panda, and Jhi uttered a comforting grunt in the back of her throat. *Jhi.* Guilt welled up again in Meilin's chest. She had taken Jhi's presence for granted so many times – but the thought of losing her entirely, especially now that they were both freed from Gerathon's control? Meilin's heart twisted painfully.

Tellun focused on each of the Four Fallen. He narrowed his eyes. "You do not feel Kovo's pull," he finally said in his deep rumble. "Your original severance from the Evertree has made you immune to Kovo's calling." He nodded thoughtfully. "You all once gave your lives in order to save Erdas. I must now call on you to put yourselves in peril once more, to stop Kovo from succeeding."

A hush fell over them. Meilin looked on, heart in her throat. She wondered for a moment if their spirit animals would answer Tellun's plea.

Then Briggan took a step forward, his fur shining, and bowed his head before the Great Elk. Pledging his dedication. Meilin's eyes widened. *He would give his life again?*

Essix let out a piercing shriek. Jhi, too, turned to Meilin, and Meilin felt her heart lift in comfort. Jhi's eyes were warm and full of wisdom, the look of the wise earth guarding her wards, the tree offering shelter from the storm, the bonfire chasing away the cold. It was the gaze of a mother. Meilin felt tears well in her eyes. She didn't want to lose Jhi.

Only Uraza pawed the ground in disapproval, leaving grooved claw marks in the dirt. Her growl sounded suspicious and scathing, the hints of a deep bitterness apparent.

Tellun bowed his head, as if understanding. His antlers gleamed. "I apologize, Uraza," he replied, "for not standing with you all during the last war. It has always been my hope to interfere as little as possible in the natural order. But I give you my word. I will stand with you to the end."

Uraza looked wary, her violet eyes flashing. A long moment passed. Finally, she nodded once to Tellun. Then she joined the others in bowing her head.

As the Four Fallen pledged their dedication, Meilin noticed something else happening. Briggan, Essix, Jhi, and Uraza looked *larger* than usual – paws wider, legs taller, tails longer, talons sharper. They looked, in fact, closer to how they must have once been before they gave their lives. Behind each of them shimmered a ghostly aurora that resembled their former selves: towering, regal silhouettes. Meilin shivered with delight at the ghost of Jhi's Great Beast form – the gentle, round panda she knew had once looked like an enormous, fierce warrior, a hulking giant that radiated respect. The shape gleamed and glistened behind Jhi, changing colors underneath the dark sky.

In the midst of the overwhelming display, a tiny movement at the corner of Meilin's vision caught her attention. It was Shane. As Tellun spoke, Shane had stayed standing at a distance from them all, unmoving. Now he took a step toward them.

Meilin thought he might be moving to attack. "Stop!" she called out,

pointing at him.

Shane stopped walking at Meilin's shout. He gave her a calm look and shook his head. If his hands weren't still tied, he likely would have lifted them in surrender. "I didn't mean to alarm you," he said. His jaw was set in a resolute gesture. "I want to come too."

"Not so fast," Abeke snapped. "This is another one of your lies."

"Yeah," Rollan added. "I don't think you're in a position to make demands, Shane."

"But what *do* we do with him?" Meilin asked, studying Shane. How strange. Not long ago, he'd seemed like such a threatening opponent. Now, he simply stood there and gave them a level look.

"I can help you," he said. "I know things that you don't."

Abeke scowled. Rollan raised an eyebrow. "Forgive us if we're a little skeptical about your intentions," he said sarcastically. Shane's expression didn't change.

Conor shook his head. "He's right. He knows more about Kovo, Gerathon, and Halawir than all of us." He took a deep breath. "I think Shane should come."

Meilin and Rollan both jerked their heads toward Conor in surprise.

"*What?*" Meilin said.

"You want him to come *with* us?" Rollan added.

"Yes," Conor repeated, his voice firm. "This is his mess in the first place. He needs to help us fix what he started."

Meilin kept her voice as reasonable as she could. "Shane is a traitor," she said. Her eyes went to Abeke, who had crossed her arms and was regarding Shane with a wary look. "Abeke, maybe you should make the call."

Abeke was quiet for a moment. Then she lifted her head higher. "I agree with Conor. Shane should come with us. Who knows what will happen if we leave him here? He might escape again. If he comes with us, at least we can keep an eye on him." She turned to Shane. Her voice became scathing. "If you're remotely genuine about anything you said to me earlier, then you'll help us track down Kovo and stop him."

Something about the thought of striking back at Kovo seemed to light a spark in Shane's eyes again. It was a small spark, a fraction of what had once

burned there, but it was a light all the same. His eyes narrowed.

“I’ll kill Kovo myself,” he said.

Tellun stepped between them, quieting everyone. He turned his head toward Shane and held his gaze. Shane trembled as he looked into Tellun’s unwavering eyes.

“Shane will come with us,” Tellun finally said. “We need all the help we can muster.”

Conor looked at Meilin and Rollan. “We’ll be careful,” he reassured them. “We’ll keep him tied tightly up.” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten what he’s done either.”

Rollan sighed, but when Essix bowed her head in deference to Tellun, he threw his hands up and shrugged. “Fine. He comes with us.”

Meilin looked at Abeke, who tightened her jaw and walked toward Shane. Anger bubbled in Meilin’s stomach, and she told herself silently that she would still make him pay for what he’d done to her and the others.

Abeke stopped right in front of Shane. “So,” she said. “You want to be worthy? Well, now’s your chance.”

THE FINAL BATTLE

THE SIDE OF MUTTERING ROCK THAT THEY HAD CLIMBED up was sheer and steep, but the opposite side sloped like a mountain, revealing a large expanse of land that ended with the white foam of the seashore. As they made their way down, Conor shot an apologetic smile at Meilin and Abeke, who still didn't look thrilled with their new companion. Shane stumbled along behind Tellun, tied to the elk with a thick length of rope. His hands were bound tightly behind him, done by Abeke and Meilin. He walked in silence, with his head down.

"Where is the Evertree?" Conor asked Tellun as he traveled beside the mighty elk.

"The Evertree grows in the place where all life began," Tellun explained. "It marks the piece of land that first emerged from the oceans."

Where all life began. Nearby, Abeke turned in interest. "Yes! We have many tales about the first land," she piped up. "Chinwe used to say that Nilo was the firstborn, birthed from the fires in the world's belly."

Tellun gave her a wise nod. "You are right, Abeke. Nilo is the First Lands, the origin of all life." Conor saw Abeke puff up a little with pride.

"But we're in Stetriol right now," Meilin said. Rollan lifted an eyebrow at her obvious statement, but she just nudged him in the ribs.

"Yeah," Conor added. "Our ship, the *Tellun's Pride*, sank as we tried to dock

in one of Stetriol's bays. How are we going to get to Nilo?"

"We will walk there," Tellun replied.

Rollan let out a grunt of disbelief. "I'm sorry," he said. "For a moment, I thought you said we were going to *walk* from Stetriol – the *island continent* – to Nilo."

"How is that possible?" Conor asked.

Tellun's antlers gleamed. "In the earliest days, when the world was very new, the oceans sat lower and left more of our lands uncovered. Conor, did your ship encounter the jagged rocks lining Stetriol's bay?"

Conor nodded.

"Those jagged teeth first existed when the oceans were low and Stetriol was young. They were called the Jaws of the Underland. The ocean swallowed them up after several millennia, but now they have returned. All of the things you have seen happening around the world – earthquakes, storms, blizzards – are turning the world back to how it looked in those early days."

Suddenly Conor understood what Tellun was saying. "In the old days, there was a way to walk from Stetriol to Nilo, wasn't there?"

Tellun paused to nod toward the ocean in the distance. "Yes. Long ago, a narrow land bridge connected northern Stetriol to southern Nilo. Now, this bridge has once again reappeared."

At that, Rollan sighed dramatically. "Oh, good to know. I wish it had reappeared a little faster, so that we could've taken *that* to Stetriol instead of nearly dying in those Jaws while sailing here."

As they traveled down from Muttering Rock and toward the ocean, Conor started to see what Tellun was talking about. Far along the horizon, waves crashed against a tiny strip of new land – it barely peeked out of the water, but even from here, Conor could see its uneven rock pushing against the sky. It connected to the Stetriol mainland.

"How far away is Nilo from here?" Conor asked. He was a bit too embarrassed to ask if he could actually walk from one continent to another.

But Tellun just blinked at him. It was strange to see a hint of mischief on such a reverent Great Beast's expression. "How would you all like a lift?" he said.



By a *lift*, Tellun meant a ride on his back. And by a *ride on his back*, Tellun meant that each step he took made the ground below them rush by, as if they were all carried forward by some magical force.

All of them – Conor, Abeke, Meilin, Rollan, and even Shane – could fit comfortably on the Great Elk’s back with plenty of room to spare. To Conor, it felt like riding on the back of a mountain – like he was close enough to touch the sky. The wind whipped against their faces as Tellun led them off of Stetriol and onto the narrow land bridge that carved a path through the ocean. Conor couldn’t help throwing his head back, closing his eyes, and letting the wind comb through his hair.

The land bridge wasn’t perfect. Essix, the only one of their spirit animals that stayed out of dormant state, flew ahead, shrieking warnings whenever she saw places where the rocks were still partially covered by the ocean, leaving paths as narrow as Conor was tall. The rocks here were slippery and wet. But Tellun never seemed to slow or stumble. He walked on, serene and mystical, and the earth beneath them flew past. Sometimes, the rocks sat so low in the water that they couldn’t see them at all. It appeared as if they were walking on the ocean, with nothing beneath them but their own reflections mirrored back on the surface of shining glass.

As Stetriol became a thin strip along the horizon behind them, Conor’s heart began to beat more rapidly. Something about the earth here pulsed with new life, like the heart of a giant creature. Conor found himself constantly searching for the first signs of Nilo.

The clouds cleared as the hours dragged into the afternoon. They traveled so quickly on Tellun’s back that by the time the sun started to set, bathing the ocean in golden light, Conor saw the telltale silhouette of land rising along the horizon. He pointed at it.

“Look!” he exclaimed. “Nilo.”

All of them – except Shane – let out a whoop. When Conor looked over his shoulder, he saw Abeke take a deep breath. “Home,” she murmured under her breath.

The clouds had started to gather again, turning darker with each passing

second as the sun dipped into the water. The wind picked up too, whipping their cloaks out behind them. Conor squinted at the approaching land. He hadn't seen this side of Nilo before – or perhaps the changing world had shifted it into something unrecognizable. The land bridge began to slope out of the water, until they were now suspended a good twenty feet above the ocean. Sheer cliffs stretched on either side of Nilo. Conor tried not to think about how high they were.

But, most noticeably, Conor could see an enormous, craterlike formation looming ahead, not far from where the land bridge connected with the mainland.

“We are drawing near,” Tellun said, his low voice sending a rumble through everyone.

Fat drops of rain started to fall right as they reached Nilo. Tellun began traveling up narrow paths that wended along the crater's edge. The air was colder here, and Conor had to wrap his green cloak more tightly around his shoulders. The trees began to dwindle until they disappeared altogether, leaving nothing but low shrubs, yellow grasses, and bare rock along the path. As they climbed higher, Conor could see the land bridge winding back toward Stetriol like a slender snake through the ocean.

The sky behind them looked gray and threatening. Conor hadn't been able to make it all out from the ground, but from this higher vantage point, he could see that the clouds streaked in ominous lines from Stetriol all the way to where they were in Nilo, gathering in swirling circles over their heads. He shivered.

As they crested the top of the crater, Conor realized that it was the remnants of what must have been the most massive volcano that ever existed. His jaw dropped at the sight. Once upon a time, this volcano would have been a formidable sight, raining lava and ash on its surroundings before collapsing in on itself in a spectacular display. Now, high from his new vantage point on top of the volcano's edge, Conor looked down on the inside of the ancient, collapsed crater and saw a huge expanse of lush green land.

Tellun spoke in the silence. “You are now on sacred ground,” he said. “This is the birthplace of all life. Only the Great Beasts can find this place.”

The clouds overhead had turned even darker, and lightning streaked at the edges of the crater. Conor's eyes shifted to a single tree standing tall in the center

of the crater. He knew immediately what he was looking at. His eyes widened.

“The Evertree.” His voice came out a hoarse whisper.

It was taller than any tree Conor had ever seen in his life. It shimmered under the dark sky, glowing as if from within, a rainbow of silver and gold. Its branches reached up to the skies in an enormous canopy of shimmering leaves. Its twisting silver trunk was at least a dozen times as wide as Tellun’s antlers. Pure white fruit hung from the Evertree’s branches. Conor could hardly breathe as he took in the sight.

The origin of all life.

A rumble of what sounded like thunder shook the crater. They all startled at the sound. Meilin glanced back at Conor with raised eyebrows. “What was that?” she said.

“Thunder?” Rollan piped up, distracted. He couldn’t take his eyes off the Evertree either.

The rumble sounded again. This time it was louder. There, standing below the Evertree’s mighty branches, was a dark shape. A jolt of fear lanced through Conor. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s Kovo’s roar.”

The ape lifted the staff high over his head. This time, his roar was unmistakable – it pierced the air and brought goose bumps out on Conor’s arms. When he looked closer, he noticed Gerathon’s serpent body coiled beside Kovo’s, and Halawir perched in the branches of the Evertree. Even from this distance, they looked enormous and forbidding, more so than during their last confrontation on Muttering Rock.

But as large as they loomed, the Evertree dwarfed them all. Somehow, this gave Conor the bit of strength that he needed.

Tellun lowered his neck so that they could all slide off. Shane, still tied up, landed on the ground with an undignified roll. He grunted. Conor picked himself up and called for Briggan. With a flash of light, the wolf appeared at his side.

“What should we do?” Conor asked Tellun.

The elk kept his eyes fixed on the Evertree. “We answer Kovo’s call,” he replied. One of his hooves stepped forward, kicking up dust.

“We ... answer his call?” Conor asked. He looked around at the others. None of them seemed to feel the pull of Kovo’s summon.

Tellun fixed him with a steady gaze. “Come.” Then he began to head down.

Meilin and Abeke called their spirit animals out too, and Essix soared over Rollan. As Tellun made his way down into the crater, the others followed, spreading out until they were all several dozen feet away from one another. Conor looked at Briggan as they walked. The wolf’s blue eyes stayed locked on the Evertree and the figures of Kovo and Gerathon underneath it. His muscles were tense, and the hackles on his back were up. Conor’s gaze shifted back to Tellun. They were answering Kovo’s call ... they were approaching him, right out in the open. What did Tellun have in mind?

Kovo turned to face them as they drew closer. He paused in his roar for a moment, then puffed his chest out arrogantly. Conor thought he could see a sneer spreading across the ape’s face. Kovo lifted the Staff of Cycles higher, then pounded his chest with one mighty fist. He slammed the staff into the earth.

The entire land trembled at the blow. Conor stumbled, barely keeping himself from falling. The sound seemed to reverberate all across Erdas, deep into the world’s core.

At first, nothing happened. Then the ground trembled again. Conor looked to the crater’s horizon. What had Kovo done?

The tremors came one after another, deep and slow. *Footsteps.*

And as Conor looked on, dark silhouettes appeared all along the far edges of the crater, each spaced apart from the other, all facing in toward the Evertree and Kovo. The tremors came in rhythmic, thundering steps, like the beating of war drums. Conor began to recognize the approaching silhouettes.

Rumfuss. Suka. Dinesh. Conor exchanged a startled glance with the others as they recognized the towering shapes of the great boar, polar bear, and elephant. Arax too, and Cabaro, and Mulop, the octopus’s huge tentacles sliding a wide path across the ground. A Great Swan flew beside them, her white wings expanded in a bright canopy of feathers, and Conor caught his breath at his very first sight of Ninani herself.

The Great Beasts had all arrived.

“Keep going,” Tellun said in a low voice. Conor pressed his hand tightly into Briggan’s neck fur, took a deep breath, and focused on the Evertree as they moved forward in step with the other Great Beasts.

As the Evertree came into better view, Conor noticed that one side of the tree had a large, dark blemish on its otherwise pristine silver trunk. The blemish was twice as big as he was, a region of black, rotting wood that seemed to be slowly eating away at everything surrounding it. An indescribable sadness sank into Conor's chest at the sight. So, this was the consequence of Kovo trying to control the tree with a partial staff. Even though it had happened long ago, the wound still looked fresh and festering.

Closer and closer came the Four Fallen and the other Great Beasts. Now their footsteps were so strong that Conor could barely keep his balance with each thundering reverberation. He had never seen all of the beasts together in one setting – dusk extended their shadows into long, endless streaks across the land, and the approaching darkness cut their enormous figures into shades of stark black and white, making them look even bigger than they were.

Keep moving, Conor reminded himself. Briggan, Uraza, and Jhi strode steadily onward, their focus unbroken. *Maybe Tellun was wrong*. What if they were feeling Kovo's summon too?

Finally each Great Beast stopped a short distance away from the Evertree, forming a ring around where Kovo, Gerathon, and Halawir had gathered beneath its canopy. Tellun halted too. Conor stood between him and Briggan, his hand still buried in the wolf's fur. His breath came in shallow gasps. Without the tremor of footsteps, the plains fell eerily quiet, the silence punctured only by the crackle of lightning and rumbles of thunder overhead. An icy wind whipped around them. None of the Great Beasts uttered a word. They stood frozen, the ominous totems of an endgame.

Kovo moved first. He pivoted where he stood, staring at each of his brethren in turn. His stare stopped on Tellun. Under the dark sky, the ape's eyes flashed scarlet. His gaze shifted hungrily to the talisman that hung from Conor's neck. The final piece of the puzzle.

"The era of our power is coming to an end," Kovo finally shouted. The wind carried his words across the plain. "The world is in upheaval. You have all seen it. I have seen it. Once, long ago, we stood against each other and let mankind destroy what should have been ours by right – the control of this world. We allowed four of our own to perish." Briggan tensed beside Conor, and nearby,

Uraza uttered a low growl. Conor's jaw tightened too. Kovo and Gerathon had been the ones responsible for the Four Fallen's deaths, after all. "Now, the end of this old era has come to pass. That is why I have summoned us all here today for a Grand Council."

He paused to hoist the Staff of Cycles again. He looked up at the Evertree's gleaming branches. "But know this!" he said, pointing the staff at each of the beasts. "With the end of this era, we can begin another. *A better* era. An era where we are truly *great* again. Everything I have done – *everything* – has been with the goal of bringing us all to our former glory. When I rule Erdas, I will ensure that all will bow to us. Our power will be unsurpassed. We should not war against each other. We should unite. Join me in this. We will be true Great Beasts!"

Conor listened in silence. His eyes wandered to the others. None of the Great Beasts made a move or a sound. *No*, Conor thought desperately. *They're listening to Kovo.*

Kovo turned back to Tellun. He brought himself up to his full height, then nodded once at the elk. "Stand with me, Tellun!" the ape roared. "You once imprisoned me, but I am now free. Don't you see how much power is here for us to take?" He stretched out one huge palm. His eyes narrowed at Tellun's talisman. "Give me the Platinum Elk," he commanded. "You know what a complete Staff of Cycles can mean for us. You know you must do this, for all of Erdas. For the Great Beasts."

For a long moment, Kovo and Tellun just stared at one another. Conor's heart began to pound. *What are you waiting for?* he thought fiercely at the Great Elk, wishing he could hear him.

Then, to Conor's shock, Tellun lowered his head. "What –" Conor stammered, not knowing what to say next. Tellun didn't reply. Instead, he let his antlers touch Conor's chest, right where the Platinum Elk talisman now hung.

Kovo's eyes widened, and a slow smile started to spread across his face. Tellun was going to take back the talisman and give it to him!

"No!" Conor shouted. He couldn't let this happen. The Platinum Elk was the only thing left that Kovo didn't have. With this, all would be lost. Conor's eyes shot to Tellun's, and he put his hand on Tellun's lowered muzzle. "Please –"

Conor begged. Meilin, Rollan, and Abeke looked on in horror. “Don’t do it. I don’t know what Kovo has done to persuade you, but you have to fight it. You —”

Tellun only met Conor’s desperate gaze with his quiet one. Conor felt as if he could see straight into the Great Beast’s soul. Tellun still didn’t speak. The rest of Conor’s plea withered away on his tongue.

Tellun lowered his head again. He made no move to take the talisman away from Conor.

Kovo’s smile wavered.

“Everything lies with you now,” Tellun said to Conor in a low, rumbling voice. He nodded once. “Protect it.”

Conor couldn’t think. He couldn’t react. All he could do was clutch the Platinum Elk close and look on as Tellun turned toward Kovo. Kovo’s fading smile twisted into the picture of rage. Tellun lowered his antlers again.

As Kovo opened his mouth to utter a furious roar, the Great Elk charged at the Evertree.

Blinding light exploded from the tree as Tellun struck it. An enormous force threw Conor clear off his feet. He flew backward, landing heavily in the grass. The brilliant light was everywhere – he couldn’t see anything. The ground beneath him trembled violently. *An earthquake.*

Then the light vanished. Spots swam before Conor’s eyes. He pushed himself up, blinking, and immediately reached out for Briggan. His hand made contact with familiar fur. As his vision cleared, Conor saw that Tellun had disappeared. All that remained was a new dark mark on the Evertree’s trunk where Tellun had struck it. Conor’s mouth hung open. A feeling of indescribable pain pierced him.

Tellun had never intended to give Kovo the Platinum Elk. Instead of letting Kovo have what he wanted, Tellun sacrificed himself.

Tellun had died.

Before Conor could react, he saw Rumfuss the Boar stamp the ground with his hooves. Huge clouds of dust whipped into the air. He, too, looked toward Conor and the other Four Fallen, exchanging a quiet, knowing look with them. Then he snorted loudly at Kovo.

“For ... Erdas!” he roared. He charged at the Evertree.

“No!” Kovo managed to call, but it was too late – Rumfuss hit the tree with a force like thunder, shaking the entire crater with the impact, and vanished in a flash of light. Another dark wound appeared on the Evertree. A shower of golden leaves fell as the tree shuddered.

Dinesh, too, stepped forward and charged at the Evertree, letting out one last, enormous trumpet of his trunk before sacrificing himself. Then Cabaro the Lion let out a bone-shaking roar and charged at the Evertree too. His impact knocked Conor to his knees. When Meilin hurried over to help him up, he saw that Cabaro was gone and the Evertree had a new wound. *Even Cabaro, the vain and cowardly!* He felt a swell of sadness and kinship.

Kovo pounded his chest in rage and snarled at the other Great Beasts. “Such fools!” he shouted. “All of you! I could have handed true power back to all of us – I could have made sure we ruled together! Do you not know that our era is waning?” He roared as Suka the Polar Bear stepped forward. “Stop!” His voice had a note of anguish in it that surprised Conor.

Meilin met Conor’s eyes with a wild, startled expression. “The Great Beasts are sacrificing themselves!” she shouted. “So that Kovo cannot control them! We have to help!” Beside her, Jhi pawed the ground and uttered a long, low, pandalike cry. It was the first time Conor had ever seen her in a battle pose.

This snapped Conor out of his shock. “Right!” he replied. He touched Meilin’s arm and looked at Rollan and Abeke. “Briggan and I will aim for Kovo,” he said. “Get Halawir and Gerathon! This is our last chance!”

The four nodded in unison. No time to waste. Conor pulled out the ax at his belt. Briggan bared his teeth at Kovo. He and Conor charged as one.

Abeke and Meilin lunged for Gerathon, with Uraza and Jhi right beside them. Rollan called Essix as Halawir prepared to take off from the Evertree’s branches. They all seemed to move in a slow, blurred motion. From the corners of his eyes, Conor saw Suka change her course in mid-gallop from the Evertree to Gerathon. The Evertree’s branches glimmered behind her towering shape. Conor veered to one side and crouched low as the bear charged past him. His hair whipped over his face and he turned his eyes up, mouth open, to see one of her enormous paws soar over his head. The rest of her was shadowed, a titan of a

silhouette with a bright glowing eye high above the earth. Then her paw crashed down to the ground, throwing Conor onto his back. He scrambled to his feet again.

The other Great Beasts were on the move too. Arax the Ram's horns looked nearly big enough to tear the Evertree down. His hooves beat against the earth, furious and heavy, ripping up entire fields of grass as he charged ahead. Kovo tensed as the ram hurtled toward him. At the last moment, Kovo sidestepped with surprising speed. He grabbed Arax's horns and twisted hard. Their shadows engulfed Conor and everything around him. The two giants toppled to the ground with a shudder, the force strong enough to crack the earth.

Halawir took off into the air – but Mulop swung his giant tentacles up. One of them caught Halawir before he could fly higher. The giant eagle shrieked in fury as the enormous suctioned rings on the tentacle wrapped around his talons, trapping him in midair. Essix dove for him, a small, stark figure against Halawir's maelstrom of beating wings. The falcon extended her talons and hurled into Halawir with an earsplitting shriek. One of Essix's claws hooked into Halawir's left wing, throwing the eagle off balance. Halawir lunged at Essix with his gleaming, razor-sharp beak – the beak tore into Essix's wing before the gyrfalcon could pull away. Essix let out an angry cry and lunged back. Even restrained by Mulop, the beating of Halawir's wings was so strong that a funnel of wind started to form around him. The gusts bent some of the Evertree's branches, and more leaves whipped around in the air.

Conor had to fight to keep from being lifted right off his feet. As the leaves flashed past his vision, he remembered his dreams in a flash. *Golden leaves, towering tree, the Great Ape roaring.* He turned back to Kovo and gritted his teeth.

“Now, Briggan!” Conor shouted.

As Kovo shoved Arax away roughly by his horns, he turned in time to see Conor and Briggan charging straight for him. He only had time to bare his teeth before Briggan slammed into him. The wolf knocked him onto his back with a heavy thud. Briggan snapped at the ape's neck, but Kovo rolled just in time, forcing Briggan off of him and swinging a mighty fist at Briggan's snout. Briggan leaped back, narrowly avoiding the blow. For an instant, Kovo was on

the ground, and his attention was turned completely away from Conor. Briggan snarled as Kovo lunged for him.

Conor made a flying leap for Kovo. His arms laced around Kovo's neck, throwing him off balance and stopping his attack. The wolf twisted around Kovo's arm. He sunk his teeth into the ape's thick wrist, making him roar in pain. Conor saw instantly that Briggan was trying to force Kovo toward the Evertree. To make him sacrifice himself in the way that Tellun, Rumpfuss, and the other Great Beasts had.

Nearby, Suka let out an earthshaking roar as she faced Gerathon. The serpent had uncoiled and now towered over the polar bear, her fangs wide open.

Conor hung on for dear life as Kovo swung around, trying to shake the boy off of him. Briggan tightened his jaw. Kovo spun to crush Conor under his back, but Conor let go at the last second and scrambled away.

Near them, Halawir managed to shake Mulop off, throwing him against the tree. Blood stained one of Essix's wings, but the gyrfalcon dug her claws grimly into the eagle. Halawir looked ready to attack Essix again when a white blur of motion struck him. Ninani the Swan! Conor ducked instinctively at the sight. Wind roared against his face. Her pale wings nearly blotted out the dark sky as they beat furiously against Halawir. An angry cry emerged from her throat. Halawir, startled for an instant, forgot Essix – and the moment gave Essix the chance to strike out. Halawir screamed as the gyrfalcon's beak tore into his side.

“Conor!”

Abeke's shout shook Conor from watching the winged beasts fight. Just in time, he saw Kovo roar and throw a heavy fist at him. Conor threw a hand up in a pitiful defense. Something silver and gray blurred in front of him before Kovo's strike could land.

Briggan.

The Great Wolf struck like lightning, his fangs shooting out at Kovo's arm and locking onto his wrist before Conor could even think. Kovo's roar changed to one of pain. He swung his arm backward, taking a snarling Briggan with him, and tried in vain to throw him off. Briggan hung on grimly. The ground shook as Kovo stumbled backward. Then he lost his footing as Briggan gave his arm a ferocious shake. Kovo roared again in fury. He twisted around and sank his teeth

into Briggan's shoulder.

"Briggan!" Conor screamed as he scrambled to his feet. Briggan winced in pain. He tried to continue hanging on, but Kovo's bite had taken its toll, and the wolf was forced to release the ape.

The earth shuddered. Conor glanced over to the Evertree in time to see Suka seize Gerathon's body between her thick jaws. She clamped down hard. Gerathon hissed in fury, twisting her body in an attempt to free herself, but it was too late. Suka charged at the Evertree with the serpent. They struck with the force of an avalanche. The tree shook, one of its branches snapping and crashing to the ground. Blinding light engulfed everyone.

When Conor could see again, Suka – and Gerathon – were gone. The Evertree leaned from the weight of the blow.

Nearby, Uraza leaped for Halawir, managing to grab one of his talons in her teeth, and Mulop wrapped a tentacle around the other. With the forces of Ninani and Essix keeping him from flying higher, Halawir screamed in frustration. He finally lost his balance and crashed to the ground. Arax the Ram was there, ready and waiting. He lifted Halawir with his horns, then charged at the Evertree with the eagle. Halawir tried to untangle himself, but to no avail.

Both Arax and Halawir struck the Evertree and vanished in a haze of light and thunder. Ninani and Mulop followed immediately afterward, sacrificing themselves in their wake.

Kovo threw his head back with a furious cry. "You *fools!*" he shrieked, grief mixed with his rage. He brandished the Staff of Cycles higher. "You sacrifice yourselves for nothing!" He bared his teeth at the rest of them. "Then I will destroy *everything*. I will destroy you all! I will rule Erdas alone!"

He looked down at the wounded Briggan at his feet.

No! Conor sprinted toward them. With Gerathon and Halawir gone, Rollan, Meilin, and Abeke rushed to help. Uraza pounced on Kovo right before he could lunge at Briggan again. Her claws dug into the ape's thick back hide. Kovo stumbled, giving Briggan the chance to dodge his blow. Kovo shook his body left and right – finally, with a terrifying growl, he spun so roughly that Uraza flew off of him. He reared up to his full height, pounding his chest with his fists. His eyes glowed red in the darkness.

And then, to Conor's disbelief, he heard Meilin's clear voice ring out. "Now, Jhi!" she cried.

THE STAFF OF CYCLES

JHI CHARGED AT KOVO. WHEN SHE REACHED HIM, SHE reared up to her full height – a formidable sight, even as a smaller version of her Great Beast self. She let out a roar. Meilin felt a sudden jolt of both fright and pride. Never had she heard such a sound before. Gentle Jhi, now a terrifying warrior. Even Kovo seemed stunned for a moment.

Meilin moved on instinct. The Bile had held her back for so long that now, to have full control over her entire body and mind, she felt completely exhilarated. She broke into a run, then stepped lightly off of Jhi’s back and made a graceful, flying leap toward Kovo. Her arms hooked around his neck. He swung wildly to shake her off but Meilin kept her balance on his shoulders. She whipped off the sash tied around her waist and yanked it tightly around Kovo’s eyes, blinding him. He threw his fists out around him, striking at the air. “Go, Jhi!” Meilin cried out.

Jhi lunged toward Kovo – but not before Kovo managed to throw Meilin off his back. She hit the ground hard. Stars exploded before her eyes. Kovo swung his staff at Jhi, forcing her back, and slammed the staff into the ground again. Light burst from the crook in all directions. Meilin and her friends cried out at the brightness and threw their arms up. Meilin felt her bond with Jhi tremble, as if a string between them had just been violently plucked. Panic rushed through

her. She struggled to her feet and staggered toward Jhi.

The panda looked back at her, also shaken. Uraza, Briggan, and Essix all shuddered in place – and Uraza’s violet eyes flickered for an instant, turning colorless. The cobalt blue color of Briggan’s brilliant eyes faded too. For a moment, it seemed as if all of their bonds would *break*.

No, they can’t, Meilin cried silently. She braced herself for the worst.

Suddenly the light from the staff flickered and died. Confused, Meilin glanced at Kovo. What she saw made her mouth drop open. Another figure had lunged at Kovo, someone riding on the shoulders of an enormous crocodile. The crocodile’s jaws were open, and his roar was directed at Kovo.

It was Shane.

Shane.

I must be hallucinating, Meilin thought, struggling to understand.

Shane let out a furious yell at Kovo, one full of anguish and anger. His crocodile snapped at Kovo. Its jaws clamped down on the gorilla’s side. Shane slashed out at the ape’s face with his saber. The blade sliced into Kovo’s eyebrow, cutting deep. Kovo roared in pain. He spun sharply, yanking Shane and the crocodile with him. Meilin tried to shake the shock from her system.

Shane won’t be able to hold Kovo back for long, she thought.

Then she realized that Shane was shouting something. Something at *them*. “Get him!” he yelled.

Jhi moved with terrifying speed. She lunged at Kovo with her jaws wide open. Her attack forced him backward. Meilin couldn’t believe how fast Jhi was moving – this was the warrior side of her, the side that Meilin had always whined to see but that Jhi had kept hidden until the moments when she knew she had to unleash it. In that instant, Meilin felt an indescribable sense of pride in her spirit animal.

Jhi had always been the true warrior. The warrior who turned to peace and kindness first, and struck only in love and defense. The *wise* warrior. What Meilin should have wanted to be all along.

Jhi’s claws raked across Kovo’s chest before he could get out of the way, leaving four deep red gashes. He roared. Shane ducked the swipe, then rolled and grabbed Kovo’s leg. It didn’t take a huge amount of force – Shane’s move

was enough to trip Kovo. He fell heavily.

Nearby, Conor rose. He put his hands on Briggan's fur, as if to strengthen their connection, and Briggan managed to stagger back to his feet. Meilin marveled at how regal Conor looked. He and Briggan charged Kovo as one. Rollan and Essix did the same – Rollan sprinting forward, Essix following him in the air, ignoring her wounded wing. Abeke and Uraza charged at Kovo too. Uraza jumped for Kovo's arm, the one that brandished the staff. Her jaws closed on it. At the same time, Briggan grabbed the arm in his teeth. Together, the two yanked hard.

"Essix!" Rollan shouted. Essix dove for Kovo's face, forcing him to throw his other hand up to defend himself. Attacked from all sides, blind and fallen, Kovo finally dropped the staff. It rolled once, until it lay at Meilin's feet.

"Now, Meilin!" Conor shouted.

Meilin bent down and seized the staff. She tossed it to Conor. Kovo let out a roar that sounded more desperate this time. But he couldn't stop Conor from taking the Platinum Elk off of his neck and looping it around the staff. Kovo's voice suddenly turned pleading.

"I could have saved you all!" he cried from where he lay on the ground. His eyes darted from one of the Four Fallen to the next, disbelieving. "If you do this, we will *all* perish! You will destroy the Evertree, and you will all die!" His gaze switched to Meilin, Rollan, Abeke, and finally Conor. "You will forever lose your spirit animals." His voice held in it a terrible tone of finality.

Conor hesitated, just for a second. Meilin swallowed hard as she met Jhi's gaze. Even in her warriorlike state, Jhi's expression was as calm and steady as ever. Meilin could feel the wisdom in her gaze, and it broke her heart. She knew what Conor had to do.

Finally Conor returned Kovo's look. "I know," he answered. His voice did not tremble at all.

Then he pressed the Platinum Elk tightly against the staff. The talisman vanished in a halo of light, and threads of bright silver lit up on the staff. It started to glow. Conor pointed it at the Evertree.

Kovo's struggles turned frantic, but the others held him firmly down. "No! You can't! *Stop!*"

Conor ignored him. He lifted the completed Staff of Cycles, took a deep breath, and rammed it into the ground.

THE EVERTREE

A BRILLIANT BOLT OF LIGHTNING STRUCK THE WOUNDED Evertree. Abeke ducked down and covered her ears, but the explosion tossed her easily to the ground. It shook the entire crater. Sparks of fire flew from the Evertree, quickly igniting on each of its lower branches. The giant tree groaned in agony, shuddering, and then an enormous crack split the entire tree down its middle. Abeke winced at the sight, as if the lightning had struck her instead.

Kovo let out one final, anguished cry. Then he too vanished in a flash of light and reappeared as a dark wound on the dying Evertree's side.

He was gone.

The Evertree tilted heavily to one side. Golden sap streamed from its wounds, painting trails of tears down the trunk and pooling in the dying grass around it. Overhead, the sky's dark clouds turned jet-black, swirling in spirals around the dying tree. For a moment, it seemed as if the Evertree might still stand, engulfed in flames. But then it gave a final groan, followed by an earsplitting crack. Abeke took a step back.

The Evertree fell.

It fell slowly, in the way a giant would fall, with all the weight of the world on its shoulders. Its silver and gold branches snapped, burning, and as the tree crashed to the earth in a storm of splinters, the clouds overhead finally split open

with cold rain – gathered since their battle at Muttering Rock. There the tree stayed, spent, its life slowly leaking away, limbs bleeding. Abeke looked on as a torrent of rain gushed from the skies, hissing as the sheets of water hit the Evertree’s furious flames. Lightning streaked across the sky in jagged rivers. Rain poured down Abeke’s face.

She couldn’t tell if it was rain, or tears.

From where Kovo had once lay struggling on the ground, Uraza crouched at the wounded Briggan’s side. The wolf’s strength was finally sapped, now that Kovo was gone. Conor had already hurried to his spirit animal, wrapping his arms around the wolf’s neck. Essix landed nearby, limping, and hobbled over to join them. Jhi sat beside Briggan, her head bowed, and Meilin stood silently next to her. Slowly, Abeke walked over until she reached Uraza. She leaned down, petted Briggan, and placed her head against Uraza’s chest. A deep, empty feeling weighed against her.

From over Uraza’s shoulder, she noticed Shane sitting some distance away. He looked dazed, his eyes locked on the Evertree. She couldn’t be sure, but his expression seemed genuinely tragic.

The colors in the sky began to change. At first, Abeke thought it was the same thing that had happened while they were at Muttering Rock – but this time, the colors were brilliant and bold, not dark and ominous. Bright scarlet and gold, green and turquoise, a rainbow of light that swirled and sparkled among the clouds. The colors blended together seamlessly, magnificently, into ribbons that trailed from the sky over them all the way to the edges of the horizon. It seemed as if the life in the Evertree had left the physical world and bled into the heavens.

Abeke could hardly bear the beauty of it.

As Abeke stared in awe, the colors began to shift into shapes and silhouettes. They solidified into a vision. Abeke’s eyes widened. She gasped, and her hands tightened against Uraza’s fur. The vision intensified, spreading until it covered the entire sky. She saw a beautiful golden land; a clear, breathtakingly blue ocean; a sky glittering with stars; a world young and pristine. The beginning of everything. She saw a tree sapling with silver bark and golden leaves growing from the new soil of a dying volcano. She *felt* the life that the Evertree’s roots breathed into the land, the beginning of the world. She witnessed the birth of the

Great Beasts that emerged from this newfound energy, and their sacred oath to watch over the world and guard it from harm. The way things used to be.

The way things were now. She saw the deep, profound connection she shared with Uraza – manifested in threads of light that tethered mankind to the kingdom of beasts – that they all shared with their spirit animals and with every living thing.

She saw death ... and she saw rebirth.

Somehow, Abeke *understood* it. She understood all of it. She tasted salt on her lips, and she no longer questioned whether or not the water running down her face was rain or something more.

This is the end, Abeke thought. She looked to Conor, who knelt over Briggan, his tears flowing freely, and the realization finally hit her that this was the moment when she might lose Uraza. The thought made her gasp in pain. She turned back to her leopard, who met her gaze with steady violet eyes. Then she wrapped her arms around Uraza's neck and hugged her tight. The memory flooded back to her of when she'd drunk the Nectar of Ninani so long ago, and how she'd felt when she first saw the sleek golden leopard. How much they had experienced together since then. How much they had won and lost. What would life be like without her?

"Thank you," Abeke whispered into Uraza's fur.

Uraza didn't respond. Instead, she stayed calm and still. Abeke could feel the tremor of her purr, as if her spirit animal was telling her that everything would be all right.

Abeke closed her eyes and waited for the end.

REBIRTH

CONOR DIDN'T KNOW HOW IT WOULD HAPPEN. WOULD Briggan disappear in a flash of light, just like the others had? Would the dying Evertree reclaim him, somehow? Or would he simply die, the way Conor had seen sheep die before, the way so many who'd crossed their paths had already died? Conor ran his hand absently through Briggan's fur. He bowed his head and braced himself. He'd always sympathized with those who lost their spirit animals, and he'd told himself to be ready for this moment ever since he first felt it during his visions.

But I'm not ready. He could never be ready. And now, the time had come.

The visions continued to shift in color. Through them, Conor saw each of the Great Beasts as they once were – Tellun, Rumfuss, Arax, then Kovo, Gerathon, and Halawir, then the others, all settling into the far reaches of the world. They vanished from sight, leaving behind bright balls of energy that swirled around the image of the once mighty Evertree. Conor saw a vision of Uraza appear in all her glory, a full-sized Great Beast. She appeared to walk toward them, and as they looked on, she turned her violet eyes toward where Abeke and the real Uraza sat.

A vision of Jhi soon joined her, as large and magnificent as she once was. Mighty Essix soared down toward them. And Briggan ... an image of Briggan as a Great Beast appeared in the sky last, the elegant and towering shape of a

beautiful wolf, loping easily up to the others and stopping at their side. The vision of Briggan looked down at Conor, then at the wounded version of himself that lay on the grass. The vision gave a single nod.

Then, all the colors in the sky faded away. The clouds returned to normal, and sheets of rain continued to pour down.

He looked down at Briggan, who gazed up at him with a bemused expression. *Our spirit animals will not die*, Conor suddenly realized. The wolf pushed himself up to a sitting position, still wounded, but otherwise alive.

“You’re going to be okay, aren’t you?” Conor said hoarsely to Briggan.

Briggan nodded, just like his vision had.

Stunned, Abeke looked back and forth between Conor and Briggan. “But – I thought you said ...” she began, “that our spirit animals didn’t live through this journey. I thought the other Great Beasts all sacrificed themselves. Uraza –”

“– had already given her life once.” Conor finished the sentence, finally understanding what the vision in the sky had meant. He broke into a huge smile as he faced the others. “The Four Fallen won’t need to sacrifice themselves again.”

Silence.

Until Rollan broke it with a huge whoop. He flung himself around Essix’s neck, to her startlement, and hugged her tight. They all broke into cheers. Conor threw his arms around Briggan’s neck. He couldn’t tell if he was laughing or crying, but it didn’t matter. Relief flooded him. Briggan was alive! So were the other Four Fallen. Even through his grief at the Evertree’s death and the sacrifices of the other Great Beasts, at least his spirit animal was going to be okay. They had defeated Kovo. That was what really mattered.

“Hey – there he goes!”

Meilin’s voice shook Conor out of his moment. He glanced over to where Meilin was pointing to a figure fleeing from them. Shane had taken advantage of their celebration in order to sneak away.

“That little coward –” Rollan growled, picking himself up and getting ready to chase after him.

Abeke was the one who grabbed his arm and held him back. She shook her head. “Let him go,” she said.

“Really?” Rollan exclaimed. “After all that!”

“We’re no better if we have no mercy,” Abeke replied, watching Shane’s back as he ran, stumbling, away from them. She took a deep breath. “He won’t bother us again.” Conor knew she was remembering the moment during their battle when Shane had thrown himself at Kovo in an attempt to buy them some time. All of his anger at the former Devourer seemed to diffuse.

So they stayed where they were, looking on until Shane became nothing more than a dot on the rainy horizon.

“Now what?” Meilin asked as Conor finally pushed himself up onto his feet. She stared sadly at the fallen Evertree. “The Great Beasts are gone.”

Conor’s attention shifted to the Staff of Cycles. It still lay in the grass near the Evertree, right where he had dropped it. He walked over to the staff, Briggan limping at his side. Conor reached it, picked it up gingerly, and studied it. The staff no longer looked as silver and glittering as it once had. In fact, it looked like any ordinary spiral of wood, even like his shepherd’s crook. Only small hints of luster still glinted along the shaft. Otherwise, it had turned wholly unremarkable.

Conor stared at the fallen Evertree. He walked over to it, where the golden color of its leaves had already begun to fade. He bowed his head in reverence before the twisted trunk and branches, then put the Staff of Cycles gently down in the dirt where its roots emerged from the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Tears sprang to his eyes.

A ripple seemed to go through the earth, but Conor ignored it, thinking it was just the wind and rain beating against him.

Then he felt the pulse again. It was like a wave had moved through the ground beneath him, the heartbeat of something *living*. Of the land itself.

He frowned, looking around. His eyes settled on the Staff of Cycles – which once more had started to glow a faint silver color.

Gradually the glow traveled to the Evertree, spreading along the length of its branches and trunk until it engulfed the entire mass of broken wood. The glow left the Evertree, then pooled into the ground around it. As everyone looked on, the torn earth from where the Evertree’s roots had ripped out now began to part. A bright light emerged from somewhere deep in the soil, revealing something

small, new, and green.

A seedling!

It was nothing more than a slender stalk of a plant, still curved in infancy and emerging from a split seed, its two delicate leaves tipped with silver and gold. The first hints of roots extended from the seed's cracks, reaching toward the ground, growing thicker and stronger with each passing moment. Conor sat down beside Briggan and watched in awe.

A new beginning. *A new Evertree.*

Conor had a feeling that, someday, when the Evertree became whole again, the other Great Beasts might return once more to Erdas. The cycle would begin anew. His arm tightened around Briggan's neck, and calmness filled his heart. Someday, Briggan might evolve back into his Great Beast form. Conor didn't know if he would be around to see it, but ... that was okay. Everything would begin again.

REUNION

THE RAIN DIDN'T LAST LONG.

Soon the clouds began to clear, revealing first a pocket of gray light, the hints of dawn, and then the brilliant gold and faint blue of a beautiful morning. Water beaded on the grasses of the crater, turning into a million sparkling gems under the light. The breeze brought with it the first true scent of summer, something sweet and fresh, nothing like the oppressive air that had seemed to hover over them for the past few weeks.

It felt as if a spell had lifted from all of Erdas.

Rollan smiled as they made their way down from the crater and out toward Nilo's southern shores. Essix soared above them, while Uraza loped ahead toward the water. Briggan and Jhi stayed with Conor and Meilin. The sun felt warm on Rollan's face, and at the sight of the blue ocean, a wild joy built up in his chest. He broke into a run. The others followed behind him, cheering and laughing. Rollan blushed when he saw Meilin sprinting beside him, an enormous smile on her face. She flashed a grin at him, and his own smile grew wider.

They all slowed to a stop as they reached the shore. The waves crashed in perfect arcs, sliding white foam up the sand and toward their feet. Rollan pulled off his boots and let his toes wriggle in the surf. He breathed deeply. The air was salty and cool. Nearby, Uraza leaned her head forward and tentatively sniffed at

the water. Behind her, Jhi ambled up. The panda paused behind Uraza, rolled her silver eyes innocently skyward, and gave the great cat a playful nudge. Uraza fell forward into the surf. She immediately pounced up, shaking water from her head, and gave Jhi a grumpy swat with her paw. Jhi just blinked big, sweet eyes back.

Abeke and Meilin laughed as Uraza chased Jhi along the shore, the two acting for a moment like they were young cubs.

“I wonder if Olvan’s forces defeated the Conquerors,” Conor said as they all joined Rollan.

“Maybe they’re already sailing for Greenhaven,” Meilin added.

Rollan smiled at that thought. He pictured the gray mood lifted from Greenhaven, and how beautiful the hills must be now. He looked down the line of Nilo’s coast that curved off into the horizon. “It will be a long journey back,” he said.

Abeke nodded, but she had a smile on her face too. “A journey spent in the best company.” She looked at Meilin as she said it, and Meilin beamed.

“One more journey,” Meilin replied. “A victory march.”

Rollan nudged Meilin in the ribs with his elbow. He gave her a sidelong grin. “I bet I can beat you back to Greenhaven.”

Meilin raised an amused eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Hey, you’ve been gone for a long while, and I’ve been training. Just saying.”

Meilin merely grinned. “Then let’s see a demonstration.”

Rollan tossed hair out of his face. Then, without warning, he darted down the shore.

“Hey!” Meilin exclaimed. “No warning? No ‘on your mark’?” She bolted too, leaving Abeke and Conor to jog along behind them, grinning at their antics.

Some things would never change. Meilin caught up to Rollan and passed him. As she did, he caught her, threw an arm around her neck, and ruffled up her hair. Meilin squealed, her laughter ringing out in the clean ocean air.

It was so nice to laugh.

It was so nice to head home.



The storms stopped in Zhong, and the earthquakes quieted in Eura. The snow disappeared from Nilo, unveiling the land in its former beauty.

Even better, the Conquerors had been defeated. With Gerathon's death, the Bile had lost its power over those who drank it. In that instant, nearly half of the Conqueror armies had simply abandoned the battle. The rest quickly surrendered.

As they sailed back toward Greenhaven, the four saw all the signs of normalcy returning to the world. Relieved looks graced the people's faces in port cities. Clusters of cheering citizens sometimes gathered on the shores to watch the Greencloaks sail by.

Still, signs of healing did not mean that tragedy was forgotten. The land bridge between Stetriol and Nilo remained, and many cities were still picking up the pieces, building new homes and farms around broken, collapsed ones. Erdas would take time to heal. Without the Nectar of Ninani, no one could be sure how the future would look for new bonds with spirit animals, or even that bonds could happen at all, until the new Evertree matured. But one thing was for sure: The bonding sickness was gone, and with it, the Bile and the Nectar.

The links between man and animal could begin anew.

On a beautiful, warm afternoon, the Four Fallen and the Greencloaks' caravan finally docked at home. As they made the final leg of their journey, Rollan could see the spires and battlements of Greenhaven Castle peeking out from the climb from the docks, basking under the light of a bright sun.

Overhead, Essix soared and let out a call of fierce joy. Rollan smiled as he looked up at her tiny figure, then turned back to the castle's silhouette.

"I can't believe you actually became a Greencloak," Meilin said as she walked beside him. She shot him a quick smile.

"Me neither," Rollan replied. "I look awful in green." Even as he smiled back, the memory of Tarik came fresh to him, bringing with it a sharp stab of pain. Rollan imagined Tarik was still alive, traveling home with them now. What would he have made of everything they'd accomplished?

Meilin watched him thoughtfully, as if she knew what he was thinking.

"Do you think Tarik would have been proud of me?" Rollan asked in a soft voice.

Meilin reached over to take his hand. She squeezed it once. “I know he would be,” she replied.

“Hey, guys,” Conor said as he trotted back to them. Abeke walked nearby too, unable to contain her excitement. “Look at the crowd that’s gathered near the castle. They’re all waiting for us!”

Rollan craned his neck. Conor was right; as they crested the top of the staircase, he saw before the castle’s silhouette a mass of people, their faint chants carried on the wind. Rollan thought they were chanting something about victory and the Four Fallen. He certainly recognized a cheer for Essix.

“Let’s go join the party, then,” Rollan exclaimed, hurrying upward.

It seemed like the closer they came, the bigger the crowd got. By the time they crested the final staircase and saw the sprawling courtyard of Greenhaven Castle, masses of people had completely filled either side.

“The Four Fallen have returned!” someone yelled as they approached. “The heroes are back!”

The cheers were deafening. Rollan waved enthusiastically as their procession passed through the crowds, while Conor bowed his head in humble acknowledgment. Abeke and Meilin just gaped in awe. With the people were also spirit animals – a beautiful crested heron next to a girl with pigtails, a boy with a white-faced monkey sitting on his shoulder, another boy with a hedgehog. As they threw rice and colorful strips of paper in the air, the heron flapped its wings to blow the paper toward them. Rollan laughed, swatting the strips away.

“*Mom!*”

Conor’s shout stopped Rollan short. His eyes darted to where Conor was looking, and there, he saw Conor’s mother and family rushing out of the packed crowds and onto the courtyard’s center. Conor pushed forward, stumbling in his haste, and then ran toward her. She pulled him into a huge hug.

Abeke let out a startled laugh from where she walked. Her father and sister waved at her from the side of the street. They had come to see her! Rollan couldn’t stop smiling as, in spite of everything, she rushed over to them. She paused for a moment right as she reached them, as if unsure what to do next, but Soama pulled her into a hug, and Pojalo put his hands on their shoulders.

Rollan searched in vain for a sign of his own mother. *I won’t find her here,*

he reminded himself with a sinking heart. Gerathon was gone now, and though his mother no longer needed to obey the Bile or live in fear – she had been with the Conquerors. Meilin and Abeke had both seen her in Nilo. Even with the Conquerors dissolving after their losses, there would be no reason for her to come *here*.

What wishful thinking. Rollan steeled his heart. *Expectations just lead to disappointment*, he reminded himself. He looked back at Conor hugging his family and tried to imagine himself in the same place, tried to convince himself that seeing his friend’s joy would be the same as experiencing his own.

“Rollan?”

The voice was quiet, so quiet that Rollan barely heard it. He whirled back around. Where did it come from? He looked at the cheering faces, but saw no one familiar looking back. A sinking feeling settled in his chest. Perhaps he’d imagined the voice. Rollan shook his head and was about to turn away when he heard it again.

“Rollan! Rollan!”

“Look!” Meilin exclaimed, pointing into the crowd. There Rollan saw a frantically waving hand making its way closer through the people. It was a woman. She had dark hair and tanned skin, and her eyes were a warm, breathtaking brown. He watched her as she made her way into the street, but even when she stood there, right before him, he could hardly believe the sight.

Mother?

She didn’t look like she had the last time he’d seen her. She looked happy now. Free.

Rollan couldn’t remember stepping forward. He couldn’t remember if he said anything, if he called out for her like Conor had, or even if he bothered to smile or laugh or cry. All he remembered was running across the cobblestones. One moment he was still with the rest of the procession, and the next, he was in his mother’s arms, holding on for dear life. He was laughing. Crying? He didn’t care.

“You’re here!” he said.

Aidana didn’t answer. Maybe there wasn’t much that needed to be said, at least not yet. So she hugged him tight, and he returned the embrace. How long

ago had it been since Rollan sat in a filthy dungeon cell, a lost orphan that nobody wanted? How much had changed. He smiled so hard that it hurt.

Through a haze of joy, Rollan realized that Abeke had stepped over to join him in his celebration, along with her father and sister. Conor and his family were hurrying up the path toward them. Rollan wiped his eyes and laughed. Then he gazed at where Meilin still stood, alone.

She was smiling too, but in the midst of all these family reunions, she looked a little lost, as if unsure whether or not she should be allowed to join them. Rollan's smile wavered for a moment.

Meilin's father was gone. She would have no reunion here today. When she saw Rollan's face, she smiled wider in an attempt to hide her sadness.

"Meilin," Rollan called out. He motioned for her to come over.

She hesitated, but when Abeke and Conor piped up too, Meilin took a tentative step forward, and then headed over with a shy smile. "Hi," she said softly to their gathered families.

Aidana smiled warmly at her, then patted her cheek. "Hello, my darling," she replied. And before Meilin could utter anything else, Rollan's mother pulled her into a tight hug.

They all joined in, Abeke, Conor, and Rollan, until they were one big pile of arms and legs and hearts and smiles. Rollan found Meilin and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He looked from her to Conor, then to Abeke. "We'll always have a family," he said. "*Always.*"

At those words, Meilin's moment of sadness faded away, and her smile turned genuine. She hugged them all back.

If Rollan used Essix's vision right then, he would see, among the throngs of celebrating revelers, a tiny, almost insignificant cluster of friends wearing cloaks of green, each blending in with the ones next to it, so that no one could tell where one ended and the others began.

They were one.

The End

MARIE LU is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Legend Trilogy and the Young Elites series. Before becoming a full-time writer, she worked in the video game industry as a Flash artist. She currently lives in Los Angeles with her husband, one Chihuahua mix, and two Pembroke Welsh Corgis, and spends her time writing, reading, drawing, playing video games, and getting stuck in traffic.

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SHANE'S LIFE CHANGED FOREVER THE DAY HE WOKE TO the sound of screaming.

It was a scream right out of a nightmare – a sound of terror, and mourning, and fury all tangled together. It was barely human.

He'd never heard anything like it before, yet he knew at once that it was coming from his sister.

Shane leaped from bed and bolted from his room. At some point he stubbed his bare toe on stone, but the pain wouldn't register until much later. At the moment there was only Drina, and the distance that kept him from her. He didn't hesitate, didn't pause at her threshold to wonder what terror awaited him, what monstrous sight could tear such a howl from his sister's throat.

But he paused when he entered the room and its unnatural twilight. His own bedroom had been bright with morning's light, and the hallway too. Something in Drina's room was blocking the light. A frayed and tattered tapestry? Thick strands of cotton? Shane couldn't quite make sense of it.

Drina had stopped screaming, but she lay convulsing in bed. Something was terribly wrong.

He went to her and gripped her by the shoulders, willing her to be still, but her body jumped and jerked beneath his fingers. She looked up at him with eyes

that didn't see him. They registered only horror.

He realized he was saying her name, over and over again. "Drina. Drina."

Then he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

He didn't turn all at once. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and his ears prickled. He knew somehow that making any sudden moves would be a terrible mistake. So he kept his hands on his sister's shoulders, and turned his head slowly, very slowly, until he was looking into the far corner of the room.

Squatting there in the shadows was the largest spider Shane had ever seen.

It saw him too. It stared back at him with eight eyes, alien and unreadable. Other than the bands of yellow along its abdomen, it was entirely black. Venom dripped from its fangs to the floor.

It stayed absolutely still, and Shane tried to stay still too. But he couldn't suppress a shudder of fear and revulsion. He had to do something. Others would arrive soon – others must have heard Drina's scream. And the next person through that door would step right beneath those dripping fangs.

He took a heavy brass lantern from Drina's bedside.

He turned away from her slowly, so that he faced the spider. He would have to put all his strength behind his throw. He might only have one chance at this.

Those alien eyes stared back, unblinking.

Shane shifted his weight and gritted his teeth. He reared back with the lantern, ready to let it fly when –

Suddenly Drina screamed again. This time, she produced a word: "No!"

She lurched from her bed, shoving into him with all her might. Shane went flying; his head smacked against stone. The world reeled, and he hit stone again, and the lantern shattered all around him, covering him with broken glass.

"He's mine," his sister said. Through a haze of red he watched her take an unsteady step toward the creature on the wall, her arm outstretched, palm up. "He's mine."

It was only then that the true horror of the situation finally dawned on Shane. Despite his fervent hopes, his sister had summoned a spirit animal.

Unconsciousness came for him, and he did not fight it.

He didn't want to see what happened next.



Shane never woke slowly. In the two years since Drina had summoned her spirit animal, he jolted awake each morning, usually in a cold sweat, always with a sense of dread. This morning was no different. He immediately scanned the ceiling, then checked the four corners of his bedroom for any sign of an animal. He kept the stone walls bare and the room clear of any clutter: the better to be sure nothing could hide from him. Finally, before daring to place his feet upon the floor, he leaned over the side of his bed, peering into the shadows beneath it like a young child checking for monsters.

It was only after he was satisfied that he had not summoned a spirit animal in his sleep that he remembered to breathe.

Shane knew the odds of being Marked were slim. He reminded himself of that fact every day. Yet despite the odds, every member of his immediate family had summoned an animal. People said they were cursed, and there were times Shane himself believed it.

He was nearly thirteen years old now. If he was going to get a spirit animal – and the bonding sickness that usually came with it – it would happen soon.

Shane slipped from bed and pulled his damp nightclothes over his head. He took a fresh tunic and trousers from his wardrobe – a wooden antique from which he'd removed the doors. That way it was one less hiding place for him to fear. And besides, Shane's uncle had use for any wood he could get his hands on.

As he dressed, Shane remembered a time in his childhood when a servant would wake him, bathe him, dress him. But nearly all the servants were gone now. And it was just as well – there was no money with which to pay them, little food with which to feed them.

Shane knew very little about the lands outside of Stetriol, but he suspected he was the poorest prince in the world.

He walked the long hallway that led to the dining hall, trailing his finger along the stone wall and tapestries, leaving a line in the dust. The tapestries showed legendary scenes of Stetriol's ancient past. On one, torrents of water flowed from the mouth of a frog, creating all the lakes and rivers. Another showed two lizards painting patterns on each other, one with a fine brush and an

eye for detail, the other without care.

Shane knew of other tapestries – forgotten tapestries that still hung from the rafters in a dark and disused corner of the castle. Those artworks celebrated other animals entirely: formidable birds of prey, and huge, vicious cats, and an octopus with startingly intelligent eyes. But the Great Beasts had cursed Stetriol. They were better forgotten.

Lost in thought, Shane jolted with surprise when he rounded a corner and saw a cloaked figure standing before him. He hoped she hadn't seen him flinch, but it was hard to sneak anything past his tutor.

“Yumaris,” he said, nodding his head in greeting.

“My prince,” she said, lowering her own head in a sort of bow. Shane imagined if she attempted to lower herself any more than that, she might never manage to get up again. She clutched her staff as if without it her heavy robes might drag her to the floor.

He wasn't sure exactly how old she was, but during her history lessons it was easy to imagine that she spoke from personal experience. The oddest thing about her, though, was that she sometimes spoke of the future as if it were history too.

Shane watched curiously as the woman produced a sheathed sword from the folds of her robes. It was the saber he had been training with lately, at his uncle's insistence. “You will be glad to have this blade,” she said, holding it out to him.

He wasn't so sure, but he took the sword and affixed it to his belt. “You're my tutor, Yumaris. Aren't you supposed to favor the pen?”

“A prince must have many tools in his arsenal,” Yumaris answered, a faraway look in her eyes. “For words and learning do little to impress a jackal.”

Shane tightened his belt and gave his tutor a questioning look. “There are no jackals in Stetriol.”

Yumaris shrugged. “A figure of speech, my prince. Now, I fear you have more pressing business this morning than breakfast.”

Shane sighed. “What is Gar up to this time?”

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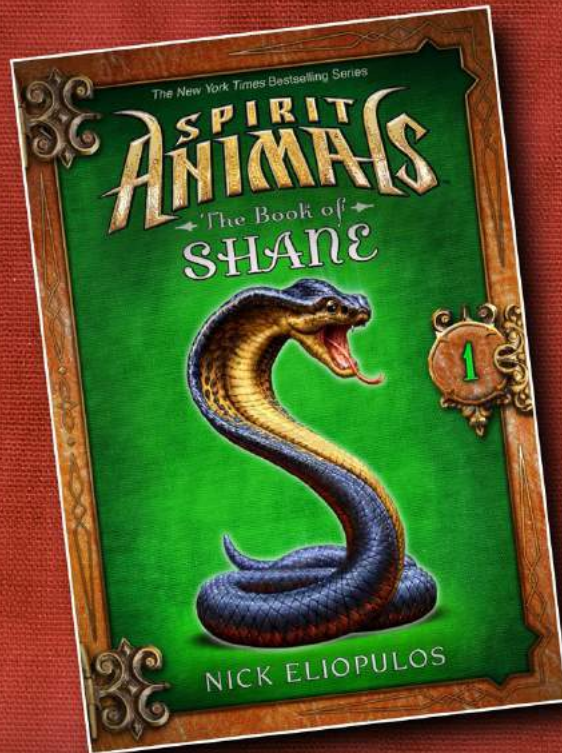


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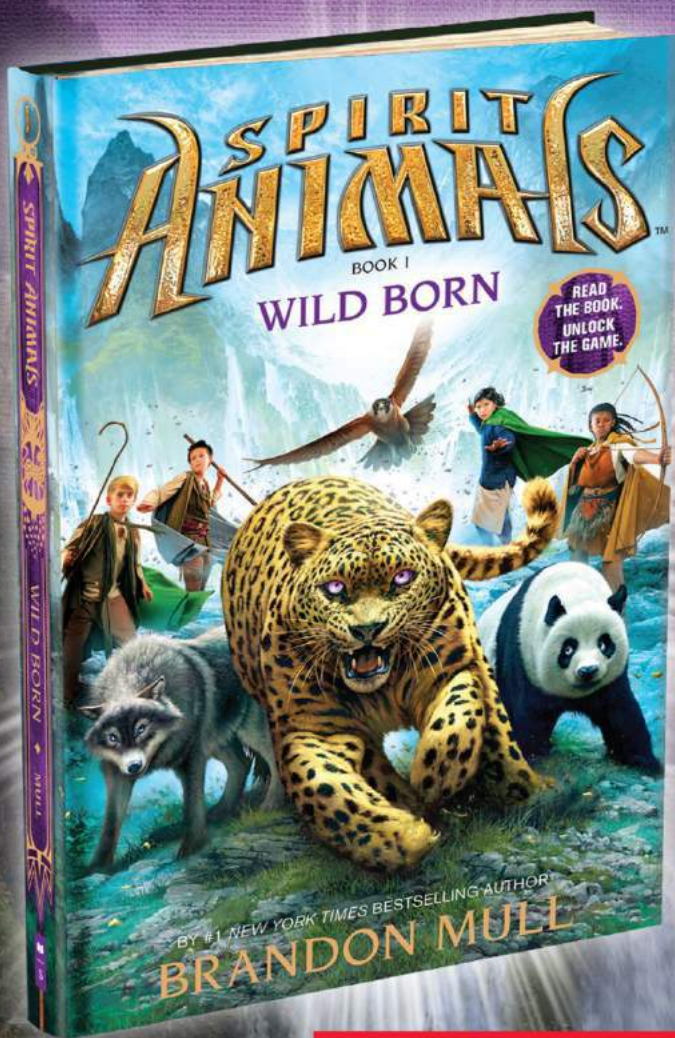
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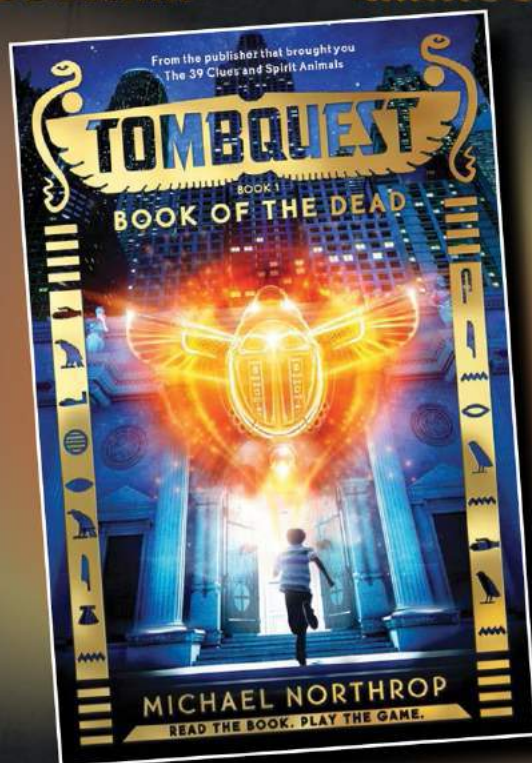
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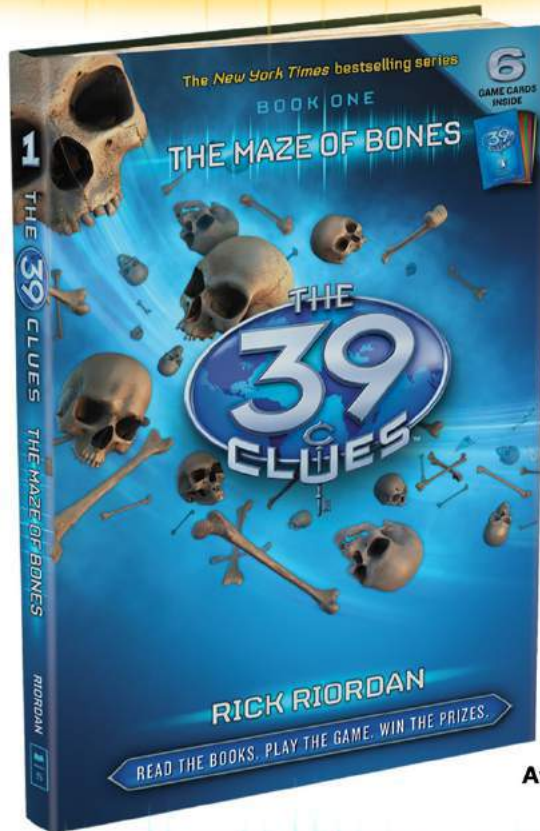
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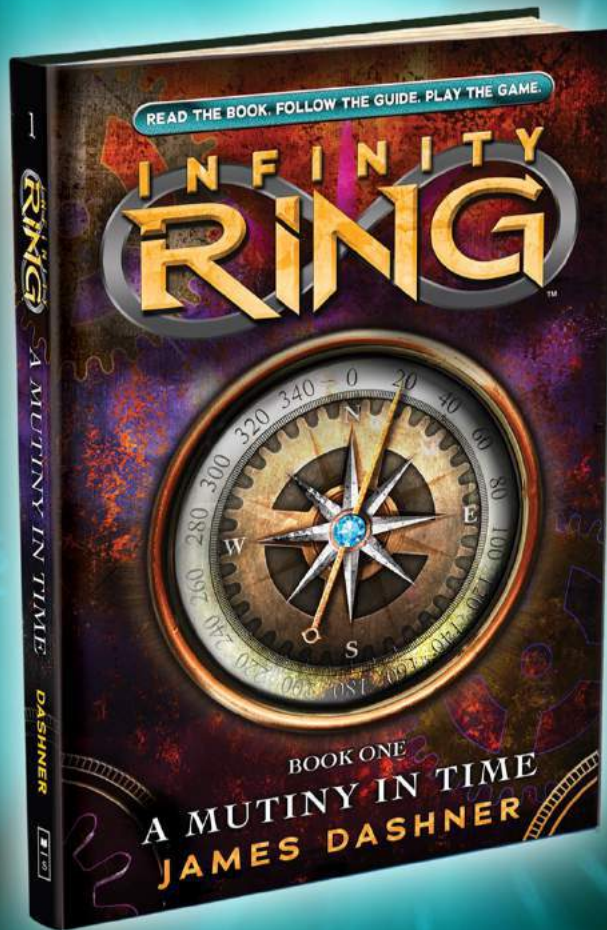


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The Evertree was the source
of all bonds between humans
and spirit animals.

And there was no mistaking it:
The tree was dying.



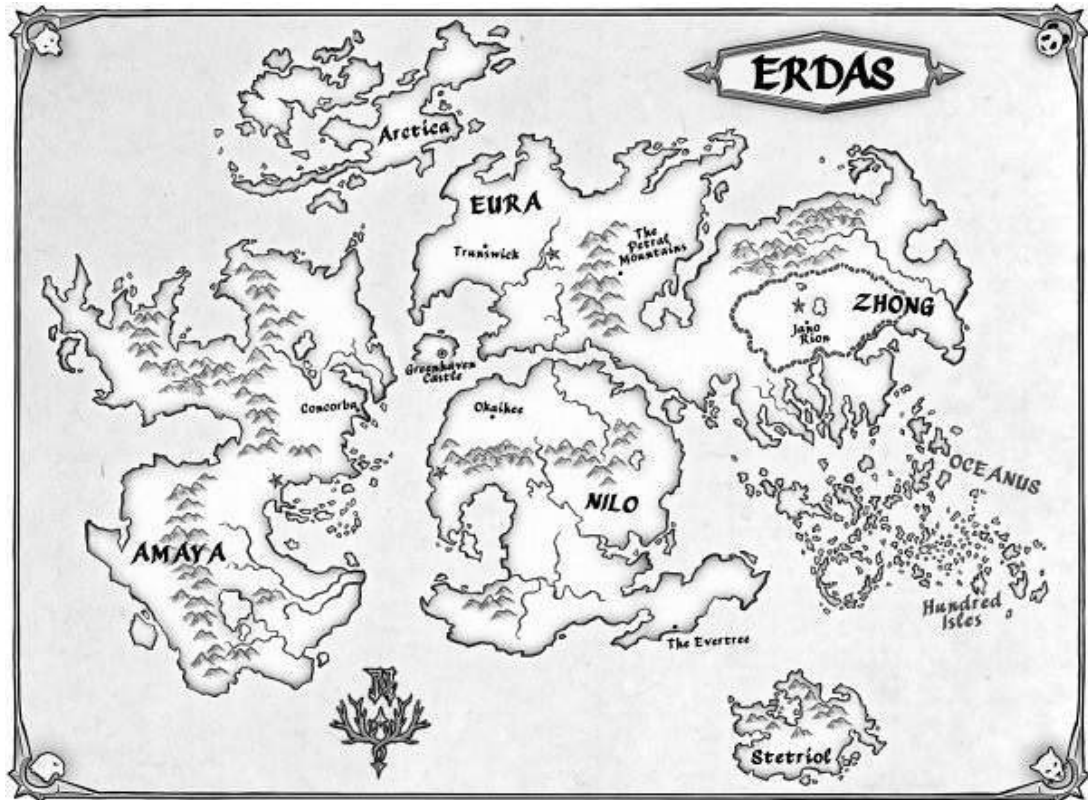
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MARKET DAY

IF ONLY SHE COULD TURN RIGHT AROUND AND GO HOME.

Normally Kaiina lived with her tribe, day in and day out—she hadn't been around this many unknown people for years, not since she had once come with her mother to this very marketplace as a little girl. But she was twelve now, which meant she'd have to start taking her turn trekking to the jungle market to buy supplies for her tribe.

Everyone had requests. Oranges for her father. A new hunting blade for her mother. Sugarfruit for her brother.

Thinking of how happy her family would be with their presents gave Kaiina the courage she needed. Holding her head high, she stepped into the clearing.

She picked her way between the woven mats, perusing the goods carefully laid out on each. Fragrant herbs, wild pineapple and celery, grouse eggs—her stomach growled as she passed among the vendors. To prevent herself from wasting her tribe's money, she recited her short list in her mind, like a mantra. *Oranges. A hunting blade. Sugarfruit.*

Vendors beckoned to Kaiina as she passed, but she timidly avoided their eyes. She'd never bartered before and was worried they'd take advantage of her the moment she showed interest in what they were selling.

“Kaiina!”

She looked up, startled, and was relieved to see a familiar old woman scamper agilely through the crowded vendor mats and come to Kaiina's side, warmly taking the girl's hands in her own. Kaiina relaxed: Prana was an

elderly woman who traveled between the tribes, bartering her pottery. Kaiina had known her for years, and had never seen Prana without a smile on her old, cracked face.

Prana's spirit animal, a brilliant brass kingfisher, was perched on the woman's long gray braid, its delicate feet hooked into the folds of silvered hair. The bird hopped to Kaiina's shoulder, warbling a cheerful, tuneless song.

I wish I had a spirit animal, Kaiina thought. *Then I'd always have company, and wouldn't have to come to market day alone.* But some people bonded with spirit animals and some didn't—there was no predicting it. And Kaiina hadn't summoned one.

"He is not usually this excited to see anyone—he really likes you!" Prana said.

Kaiina took a moment to run her hand over the bird's smooth and glossy plumage. He raised his chin, inviting her to preen his underfeathers. Kaiina smiled and obliged.

Just then, Prana's kingfisher took to the air and began to shriek. From all around, the trees shook. Monkeys screamed. Cicadas droned. Songbirds chattered.

Kaiina felt a strange dizzy sensation wash over her, and the market fell into silence.

The ground seemed to tilt beneath Kaiina's bare feet. "What is happening?" she cried out.

Though only moments before she'd been so hot she was sweating, Kaiina shivered with a sudden chill. The sky went dark, and the clouds turned rageful and knitted together. She heard a boom and a crack, and her eyes filled with light.

The explosion knocked Kaiina and Prana to the ground. Ears ringing, Kaiina's first thought was to help the elderly woman up. But Prana was already back on her feet, tears in her rheumy eyes. Blinking her own eyes rapidly to clear the purple flash, Kaiina raised herself onto her elbows.

As quickly as they'd formed, the clouds scattered. The clearing was once again full of radiant sunshine, its brilliance frosting the silhouette of a giant creature where just moments before there had been nothing.

"It is not possible," Prana whispered. But it was. An elephant had appeared.

The massive beast bowed its head, trunk slung low and snuffling along the ground. Kaiina had seen plenty of forest elephants in the jungle, but none as big as this one. Its broad ears swayed as it made its way toward Kaiina and Prana. Vendors and tribespeople alike fled to the edges of the market, watching with fearful curiosity.

Kaiina's legs were rooted to the ground.

"D-do you know this elephant?" she stammered to Prana. "Where did it come from? And why is it coming toward you?"

"Not toward *me*, child," Prana said, wonder in her voice. "It's coming toward *you*."

"I don't understand!" Kaiina cried, tears blurring her vision.

"You've summoned a spirit animal," Prana said. She had placed a wizened hand over her mouth, making her words almost inaudible. "But an elephant, the eyes ... it's impossible! Kaiina, you've summoned Dinesh."

Dinesh? A creature of legend, one of the Great Beasts of Erdas? It felt as if the earth went soft beneath Kaiina, as if she'd stepped into slipmud.

The elephant slowed as it came near, and Kaiina was shocked to see it lower its great head. Brilliant aqua eyes met hers, and they flashed with intelligence and something almost like amusement as they took in the cowering marketgoers. Could this animal truly be the great Dinesh?

"Say hello," Prana encouraged. "He's waiting to meet you."

The creature's expression softened, and Kaiina found her legs were able to move again. Despite the dozens of eyes she could feel on her back, despite the ruckus of the upturned earth and the bizarre sight of an enormous elephant standing on the woven mats, Kaiina didn't shrink away. She *wanted* to touch him. A charge was building up inside her, setting her skin tingling, and she knew instinctively that only one thing would settle it.

Hands trembling, she strode to the elephant and leaned in close so their faces were mere inches apart. As she ran the back of her hand along his leathery ear and closed her eyes, a serene warmth filled her.

Kaiina felt a moist touch on her neck. Opening her eyes, she smiled as she saw that Dinesh's large trunk was nuzzling her. *Comforting* her. Suddenly she felt as large as the elephant, somehow—too large to be intimidated by a crowded marketplace. It seemed ridiculous that she'd ever been.

Kaiina hesitantly laid a hand against the elephant's flank. His flesh was

rough and thick, his giant torso rising and falling beneath her fingers. She looked into the elephant's eyes and saw a vast intelligence gazing back.

"How could I have summoned Dinesh?" Kaiina asked in wonder. "And why to *me*?"

Before Prana could answer, a man in a black tunic stepped forward. "This is indeed an auspicious morning!" the stranger called. "The Great Beasts are returning, and I have been sent to shepherd them to safety."

Prana's golden kingfisher pointed his sharp beak shrewdly at the man. Kaiina's attention was drawn to the charcoal-colored spiral on the man's forehead. She could see now that it was raised and swollen, more of a brand than a tattoo. It almost appeared to ripple in the wavering heat, but after the shock of the last few moments, Kaiina wasn't sure she could trust her senses. She leaned into Dinesh's side for security, and took comfort in the slow rise and fall of his ribs.

"You may leave the girl and her elephant in my care, old one. I will handle it from here."

The elephant raised his trunk into the air, letting out a deep trumpeting call, the sound powerful enough to reverberate deep in Kaiina's chest. From elsewhere in the jungle, other elephants called in response. When she heard distant crashing sounds, Kaiina realized the other elephants were converging on them.

Dinesh tossed his head in the stranger's direction, lowering his tusks and leveling them toward the man in the black tunic. Kaiina stroked Dinesh's ear and saw that the elephant's eyes were full of distrust.

"*Kalistan-ah*," Kaiina whispered to Prana in the local language. *Beware.*

Before Prana could respond, the stranger stepped toward them. He was handsome and tan-skinned, a trim beard covering his jaw. "*Sia-ga*," he said, a wicked grin splitting his face, "I speak your language, and yes, you should be afraid."

The treetops again began to shake, and the nearby monkeys and birds recommenced their shrieking. The cicadas went from a low drone to a roar. Kaiina looked to Dinesh, hoping to discover in the elephant's soft eyes that she had nothing to fear. But fear was precisely what Kaiina found there.

Dinesh took a step forward and then a step back, lowering his head nervously. Kaiina followed his gaze and saw a thicket of spiny jungle growth

tremble and shake. As the branches bent farther and whatever creature was behind them began to emerge, Dinesh trumpeted again.

“What’s wrong?” Kaiina cried out. The powerful vibration of the elephant’s call rattled in her head.

Marketgoers had begun to approach from their safe vantage, but paused after they heard the elephant’s trumpet. It was a good thing they did, too, as Dinesh suddenly charged. They scurried to get out of the way, but the elephant was only halfway across the clearing when he abruptly halted, momentum hurtling his body through the dirt and nearly pitching him forward.

Emerging from the thicket was another huge creature. It was a bear, but unlike any Kaiina had ever seen. She’d been taught that bears were always brown or black, but this one was white, its fur as light as morning clouds against the vibrant blacks and greens of the jungle. Baffled, Kaiina wheeled and caught Prana’s startled eyes.

“What wrongness has come to our world?” Prana cried, her hand to her heart.

There was a cry from the sky, and a large eagle descended, lowering so it was flapping above the polar bear. Then there was a roar from the other side of the clearing, and Kaiina pivoted to see a giant boar, thick-tusked and bristly.

Blinded by fear, Kaiina ran toward Prana but was blocked by a new creature—this one a muscular beast on all fours, like a stocky antelope, but with curling horns on its head. It used those horns to butt into Prana, who staggered and fell before Kaiina’s eyes. Her kingfisher hovered, trying ineffectually to stop the beast’s assault.

Kaiina backed up, hands outstretched as she sought the company of her newfound spirit animal. Dinesh wasn’t hard to find, trumpeting and screaming as he whirled in the center of the clearing, facing off against both the polar bear and the boar. Standing calmly between the two attacking beasts was the stranger in the black tunic.

“Why are you doing this?” Kaiina cried.

The man didn’t answer. Hearing Kaiina’s distress, Dinesh pivoted to face her. With one clean motion he whipped his trunk around, caught the girl around the waist, and deposited her securely on his broad back. He

immediately returned to fending off the bear and the boar, whipping his great tusks through the air to keep them at bay.

The stranger grinned at Kaiina. The spiral on his forehead was definitely moving now, writhing under his flesh. “Haven’t you figured it out? I am collecting the Great Beasts. And Dinesh is my next trophy.”

With that, the man pulled an obsidian vial out of a pouch at his waist and unstopped it. A feeling of cold dread passed through her.

The polar bear and the boar had spread out. The elephant turned in nervous circles. With the other Great Beasts flanking him, Dinesh could no longer fend off both attackers at once. Kaiina wondered how much longer his tusks would keep them safe.

With a rush of wind, the eagle was there. It hovered beside the bearded man, who placed the mysterious black vial in its talons. With a few flaps of its strong wings, the eagle flew up toward Kaiina. She cringed, clenching her legs tightly against Dinesh as she instinctively threw her arms before her face.

But the eagle wasn’t coming for her.

Kaiina watched in horror as it dexterously turned the vial in its talons, letting the contents fall onto Dinesh’s broad forehead. At first Kaiina thought it was a piece of gray mud inside, but then she saw the glob start moving, and realized it was a worm, or a leech—the same size and shape as the twisting spiral on the stranger’s forehead. Kaiina leaned forward desperately, hoping to use the back of her hand to wipe the little monster off Dinesh.

But the worm was surprisingly fast. It wriggled over Dinesh’s forehead, easily sticking to the elephant’s hide, no matter how frantically he tried to shake it. The worm pressed its toothy sucker mouth against Dinesh time and again, but was clearly finding it hard to get through Dinesh’s tough skin. Kaiina swatted at it, but the wriggling creature was too fast. It lurched for Dinesh’s ear, soon disappearing in the folds. She realized how far it had gotten when she heard the elephant cry out in pain and shake his head furiously.

Dinesh began to tremble and shudder beneath Kaiina’s thighs. He lifted his head and trumpeted one more time, a terrible, anguished cry. Then he went quiet and still.

The bear and the boar relented, stepping back from the elephant.

“Dinesh!” Kaiina yelled. Her hands were clamped on the elephant’s head.

“Are you okay? Dinesh!”

He was motionless.

“At least you had a few moments with your spirit animal,” the man said. “Some I don’t even give that much.”

Kaiina rubbed the elephant’s hide, hoping Dinesh would reawaken to her touch. But the electricity was gone, and the elephant remained still.

The boar relaxed and sat in the dirt while the bear panted heavily in the jungle heat, tongue lolling out of its mouth. Kaiina felt suddenly light-headed, like she might pass out from shock.

The stranger in black tugged at the length of rawhide that tied the collar of his shirt closed, exposing a broad chest. In the middle of it, right in the triangle where his abdomen began, was a tattoo of what looked like a cobra. The stranger closed his eyes, his brow wrinkling with concentration. Then, with a flash, the bear and boar had disappeared, appearing on the man’s chest, one on either side, forelimbs reaching out onto the muscles of his shoulders. Kaiina heard popping sounds behind her and saw two more tattoos appear on the man’s chest: an eagle and a ram. There was a large space left in the middle, right below his throat.

“No, no ...” Kaiina moaned, realization dawning.

“Oh, but yes,” the man said, his voice a low purr.

There was another flash, this one right below her, and suddenly Kaiina was falling. She fell hard onto the muddy ground, the breath knocked out of her. Wheezing and shaking, she raised herself on her hands and saw a new tattoo in the center of the man’s chest, riding over his breastbone. Dinesh.

“Who are you?” Kaiina gasped. “Why have you done this?”

The man loomed over her, crossing his arms over the animal tattoos on his powerful chest. The strange spiral brand on the man’s face writhed. He winced as the flesh on his forehead puckered and stretched. His eyes took on a dim glow, became the color of twilight.

“The whole world knew my name once, and soon it will know it again. I am Zerif.”



THE EVERTREE

IT WAS A BREEZY, BEAUTIFUL DAY, AND THE EVERTREE WAS singing. As the wind passed through its leaves, they tinkled together and played a song as chaotic and joyous as a burbling stream. Lenori raised her hands to the sunshine and closed her eyes, taking in the magnificence of the moment.

Part of her wished she could stay here forever.

Back in Greenhaven, Lenori had kept a simple herb garden. She'd loved the daily labor of it—running her fingers through silky black soil, picking just the right spot to place each batch of seeds. She supposed that growing plants wasn't that unlike training the new Greencloak recruits. When a child summoned a spirit animal and joined the ancient order, it had been Lenori who would care for them. Not just their training, but their hearts and well-being, too—something blustery Olvan often overlooked.

But all the same, when she'd lived in Greenhaven, Lenori had often found herself taking long walks along misty battlements, looking down longingly on a forest world that seemed all too far away. She'd never quite taken to gray stone walls.

Her new job taking care of the Evertree was much more suited to her.

For generations, it had been the secret source of the spirit animal bond—perhaps the source of life itself on Erdas. But the world fell into war. Kovo the Ape, one of the Great Beasts, betrayed his brethren in a bid to control the Evertree. During the resulting conflict, it had been destroyed.

Then, through a miracle that Lenori had yet to fully understand, after the Great Beasts sacrificed themselves, the tree was born anew.

Above her, the Great Tree's branches groaned in the wind. Its golden leaves rustled, their song growing louder.

How beautiful the tree was! Every day its splendor grew. The height of a mountain, its great silver spire rose so tall that its highest branches stroked the clouds, generating a constant patter of rain on the ground below. After its first months of rapid growth, the tree had begun to sprout golden leaves, each an intricately wrought marvel, as delicate as the finest filigree, fanning out from the elegant arcs of the tree's branches. The Evertree changed colors according to the sun's mood, going from silver-white at dawn to blazing yellow at midday, then maturing to muted, steely afternoons and purple explosions at sunset. Living with the tree was the opposite of lonely, not when Lenori had that magnificent canopy above her. And of course there was also Myriam, her rainbow ibis companion.

In Greenhaven she'd been a vain, preening creature, taking great pains to arrange her feathers just so, ensuring that every color of the rainbow was on display somewhere on her body. But now Myriam was too busy playing host to worry about that—the ibis kept busy greeting each newly arriving bird as Lenori made her long daily trek around the vast trunk of the Evertree. Myriam would join Lenori at camp at the end of each day, snacking on a few tasty bugs from the mud before plopping down beside Lenori's bedroll, exhausted.

One day, though, Myriam hadn't come to her before sunset. That was unusual, but not much cause for concern; some new peacocks had recently arrived at the tree, and Myriam had spent the day following them around, keeping tabs on which was the most beautiful. When Lenori finally tracked Myriam down, she found her staring at a patch of bark along one of the tree's silvery exposed roots.

Lenori knelt beside the ibis and stroked her spirit animal's iridescent plumage. Her focus remained on the tree. Lenori looked where she was staring, and her heart stuttered.

Rot.

It was a patch no longer than her finger, as purple-gray as a bruise on a pear. When Lenori tentatively pressed her finger to the blemish, she found it was soft, squishing beneath her touch with a wet, sighing sound.

She'd never considered that the Evertree could be susceptible to the same minor infections that plagued all trees. Lenori examined it for any other signs

of illness, but the Evertree was shining and healthy. As she lay down in her bedroll that evening, her thoughts were on that strange black mark.

The next day Myriam kept close to Lenori's side, hopping along the shady ground, never more than a few feet away, even ignoring the upstart peacocks when they brazenly strutted by. When Lenori returned to the spot where she had last seen the rot, she held her breath.

And let it out in a sharp gasp.

The patch had grown. When Lenori placed her hand over the root, the blemish was the size of her middle three fingers. She tentatively tried to peel the rotten bark away, and when the black sludgy paper came free in her fingers, she saw there was a crevice behind the rot, a black arc slicing into the tree's pristine silver.

Lenori had grown up in the mangrove forests of Amaya and knew a few tricks for curing tree rot. She gathered lichen and wedged it into the narrow black crack, wetting the patch with pond water. Lichen had its own ways of fighting invaders and could work like a poultice to stave off this black sickness, if the Evertree couldn't manage it on its own.

But when Lenori next returned, the lichen had withered and the rot was bigger. It was as big as *her* now, a Lenori-sized patch of decay along a root of the tree. It loomed over her, like an accusation.

Lenori stepped toward the rot reaching up the trunk. As usual, she tested it with her fingers, removing whatever bits of black mush she could, hoping to slow the infection's progress. This time, when she pressed against the rot, it gave way with a soft tearing sound. Her arm passed right into the humid space behind.

Lenori ripped away at the cavity, heedless of the black goo caking her arms and face. The dead bark was like a curtain, hiding an empty space that extended back into the tree. She took a tentative step into it and gasped.

The rot must have been eating at the tree for a long time, longer than Lenori had known. She was in a cavern that led deep into the tree, bits of dying wood dropping around her. Everywhere was the strangely sweet smell of death and rot, and the soft slimy blackness of the Evertree's sickness.

Looking down, Lenori saw that the rotten hollow extended down, into caverns and dank tunnels under the earth.

The Evertree was the source of all bonds between humans and spirit

animals. If it fell, those partnerships would cease to exist.
And there was no mistaking it: The tree was dying.



HOMECOMING

MEILIN WAITED IMPATIENTLY ON THE DOCKS. ITCHING TO ascend the path to Greenhaven and greet her friends, she massaged a knot of worry that had appeared at the back of her neck. That knot was an old friend—it had shown up during the war, and only left her after months of peace spent in Zhong, undertaking the simple, satisfying work of rebuilding a nation stone by stone. But now that she'd gotten word of Erdas's new troubles, the knot was back.

She flexed her dominant arm while she waited, hoping she hadn't gotten too soft during her time home.

Greencloaks were coming and going along the docks, whispering among themselves and cutting admiring glances at Meilin. Meilin had more self-assurance than most twelve-year-olds, or most adults for that matter, but it made her nervous to be seen as a hero. In Zhong, she'd perfected a serene smile, warm enough to honor the person's interest but chilly enough to discourage handshakes and questions.

"Aren't you done yet?" Meilin asked the guard imperiously.

She'd been ready to drag her trunk right up to the hulking castle of Greenhaven, but a young Greencloak had stopped her along the path. He'd apologized and then started searching Meilin's trunk, meticulously picking through her things.

"Find any hidden weapons?" Meilin asked.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the guard said, embarrassed. "We're required to search everyone arriving in Greenhaven. After the war ..."

"Yes, yes. I remember the war, believe me." It had only brought Meilin

the title of Hero of Erdas. It had only caused her to bond to a Great Beast. It had only killed her father.

The guard turned bright crimson as he got to the last layer of Meilin's case: underwear. "I don't suppose you suspect I've hidden any killer crocodiles in those?" Meilin asked, peeking over his shoulder.

Jhi, a giant panda, made a warning grunt where she was sitting a few feet away and philosophically chewing on a piece of bamboo. Lately Jhi had started to take Meilin to task whenever she slipped into rudeness. It was very annoying.

Suddenly aware that her arms were crossed over her chest and her nose was raised haughtily, Meilin forced herself to smile at the guard. "I, um, like your turkey."

The man's spirit animal, a particularly unimpressive fowl that was ecstatically picking worms out of a nearby leaf pile, raised its head, shook its wattle, then returned its attention to the dirt.

The guard finished his search, his face still crimson while he stuffed Meilin's underwear back in her trunk as fast as he could. "Sorry for the delay, ma'am," he said. "Everyone gets searched, even the Four Heroes of Erdas."

"You can make it up to me by carrying my case," Meilin said. Jhi grunted again. "Oh, fine, I'll get it myself."

Meilin and Jhi began the walk up the long and winding path to Greenhaven castle, an imposing gray stone structure that rose high over the sea. Though it was an intimidating place, Meilin felt an unexpected joy when she saw it. Greenhaven was as much her home as Zhong. All the same—if she'd had her way, she might never have come back.

Rollan, she thought as she scanned the ramparts of the imposing stone fortress the Greencloaks called home. *Where are you?*

She'd known the situation was serious when Rollan sent his own spirit animal to call her back from Zhong. She'd been ready to bunk down for the night after a long day helping build a new bridge for the capital when the falcon had rushed into her cabin. A small golden tube had been banded to one of Essix's legs.

Even in her exhaustion, the falcon had managed a disdainful look as Meilin unscrewed the top of the cylinder and tugged out a rolled-up letter. Meilin had imagined what Essix would say if she could: *Essix the Falcon is*

not a messenger pigeon! Essix eats messenger pigeons for breakfast!

The note had been ominously short.

Meilin,

I know you had to spend some time away for your sanity, and I'm not asking this lightly. But you must come to Greenhaven as soon as you can. Evertree in danger. Will explain when you get here.

—Your Rollan

Rollan had once described the feeling of being far from the gyrfalcon as having someone scratch at his eyelids. Sending Essix all the way to Zhong must have been excruciating. Meilin couldn't wait to see her friend's face when he was reunited with his spirit animal. She couldn't wait to see his face in general, actually.

Essix had flown on ahead as soon as Meilin's boat arrived, but now returned, alighting on Meilin's shoulder with a squawk of delight. Then, with a shriek, Meilin was bowled over by an unseen assailant. She panicked for a moment, before she felt the long, stinky licks of a wolf's rough tongue on her cheek.

"Briggan!" she cried, laughing with joy through her tears as she wrapped her arms around the wolf's neck. "Conor!" she shouted, hoping Briggan's human partner was nearby. "Where are you? Get this oversized dog off me!"

But Briggan kept licking, and before she knew it Meilin was joined on the ground by her friends Abeke, Conor, and then Rollan, laughing and hugging as they rolled on the flagstones of the path, heedless of the scene they were making.

One of the Greencloaks making his way up the path giggled, and the phrase "*Four Heroes of Erdas*" passed through Meilin's mind. She remembered her dignity and stood up, primly brushing soil and grass from her traveling clothes.

Rollan stayed on the ground and looked up at her, ripping up a handful of grass and adding it to the bits already dusting his shiny, unkempt hair. Meilin's heart kicked when she saw that the lean Amayan boy looked just the same, with his dark hair and impish grin. At least some things hadn't changed during her time in Zhong.

"Embarrassed to be seen with us, milady?" Rollan joked. Essix landed

neatly on his shoulder.

Conor smudged some mud on Rollan's nose, then busted into a guffaw. "Now she'll be embarrassed of you."

Abeke turned serious before the boys did. The tall Niloan girl brushed herself off, too, and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Meilin. She pointed up at Greenhaven castle. "I'd hoped we could give you the time off you wanted—we wouldn't have called you back unless we had to, I promise. Let's head up to the castle. I'll explain on the way."

Abeke took one handle of Meilin's trunk, and together they started up toward the fortress. Abeke's leopard, Uraza, and Jhi kept pace with them, the boys and their spirit animals tailing behind. Abeke had clearly been practicing her fighting skills while Meilin was off helping rebuild Zhong; as they walked Meilin admired the bands of muscle lining the Niloan girl's arms. Even the bow on Abeke's back looked heavier than the one she'd previously used. But Meilin knew what her friend would really want her opinion on. "I like your new skinnier braids," Meilin said to Abeke.

"Really?" Abeke said, her hand unconsciously going to her hair. Abeke toyed with the wooden bead at the end of a braid, then let it fall. "I've been experimenting. It was good while it lasted. There won't be time to worry about hairstyles anymore. Not now."



When Abeke started telling Meilin about recent events, all thoughts of hairstyles vanished from her mind.

"Great Beasts summoned as spirit animals, the Evertree sick—that can't be a coincidence," Meilin murmured.

"You think?" Rollan said sarcastically. "We managed to figure that much out, too."

"You can see why we wanted you back here," Abeke said.

"Of course," Meilin said gravely. A stony weight settled in her stomach. "What does Olvan have to say about all of this?" Meilin asked. The leader of the Greencloaks was their best source of wisdom.

"He went to check on Lenori at the Evertree. Due back any day. But wait," Abeke said. "You haven't heard the worst part."

Conor gave an involuntary shiver and wrapped a hand around his sleeve,

pinning it to his arm. As if to hide something.

“What’s going on?” Meilin asked.

“Surprise,” Rollan said flatly, pointing ahead of them.

Meilin’s gaze snapped forward. She dropped her side of the trunk. It fell against the flagstones, the wood splintering. “No! Oh no. What have we done?”

They’d arrived at the main courtyard of Greenhaven. It had none of its usual bustle, and even Mustado’s familiar merchant stall was shuttered. Armed guards had been stationed on the battlements, all facing down into the courtyard. The reason was very clear. Chained in the center was an ape. Not just any ape: a gorilla.

The beast’s rounded shoulders were what Meilin saw first. Broad stretches of pure muscle were covered in coarse black hair that turned silver where it trailed down his back. He stood on all fours, knuckles pressing heavily into the ground. The gorilla’s noble, squared brow was held as proudly as possible, but a collar had been fitted around his neck, and the chain didn’t reach quite high enough for him to raise his head. The ape was hunched, eyes scrunched tight, as if by squinting he could shut out the discomfort of his imprisonment.

“Tell me that’s not Kovo,” Meilin whispered.

“It is,” Conor spat. “He’s back.”

“Summoned as a spirit animal,” Abeke said, with a sighing sympathy in her voice. “Just like ours.”

“*That’s* the one Great Beast we managed to rescue?” Meilin asked. “The traitor?”

“He’s smaller than before, at least,” Rollan said. “Mini-Kovo.”

“He is plenty big enough, thank you,” Meilin said, refusing to take another step toward their sworn enemy. “Who summoned him?”

Her eyes lit on a skinny boy dressed in a stiff blue cotton robe drawn tight with a white sash. He was cross-legged on the ground, hunched like Kovo, his face in a motionless frown. Like the ape, he looked like he was focusing all his energy on surviving his current torment.

“Whoever is going around stealing the Great Beasts didn’t manage to sever that boy’s bond to Kovo?” Meilin asked.

“We got to him first,” Abeke whispered. “Thanks to Conor. Takoda was

raised by monks in a monastery in Southern Nilo. One of the monks was a Greencloak, fortunately. After Kovo appeared, she kept Takoda safely locked away while Conor rushed down to bring them back to Greenhaven.”

Conor blushed slightly. “They were already under attack when I got there,” he said. “I was lucky to get them out at all.”

“Who was attacking?” Meilin asked. “I don’t understand who could do this. Are there still Conquerors out there?”

Conor stared furiously at the ground, hand tight on his sleeve again. “It was Zerif,” he said.

Meilin stared between her friends, anger rising within her. She knew that name. Zerif was a war criminal. One of the cruelest and most cunning enemies they’d ever encountered. But he’d never held the power to take a spirit animal. No one did.

“But we got to Kovo first. And he’s certainly not in a position to cause anyone any trouble now,” Abeke said, looking at Kovo with something almost like sympathy.

As if in response, Kovo slowly opened his eyes ... and found Meilin’s. She had forgotten how startling their color was. At the sight of his scarlet irises, cold sweat broke out down her back. Much as she tried to calm her fear, her instincts told her one thing only: *Run*.

Meilin fought to master the urge to flee. She would *not* let her enemies control her.

The courtyard had fallen silent as Kovo roused. All eyes turned toward the gorilla. He took in the scene blankly, betraying no emotion on his face. After giving Meilin a long, scalding look, he slowly closed his eyes again.

Abeke cleared her throat. “Takoda,” she called to the seated boy. “Do you want to meet Meilin? The one we were telling you about?”

Meilin tore her eyes away from Kovo’s hulking form as the boy got to his feet and walked over, shaking the chill out of his legs and knees. He was about Rollan’s height, but so thin that even his stiff cotton robes couldn’t hide the narrowness of his frame. When he got near, Meilin became confused—though his skin was dark, his features seemed almost Zhongese. When he spoke, his accent was like anyone else from Southern Nilo.

“You must be Meilin of Zhong,” he said, bowing his shaved head. “It’s an honor to meet such a famed warrior.”

“Oh,” Meilin said, hoping the blush she felt wasn’t showing. “Thank you.”

“You’re as polite as always, Takoda,” Rollan said to the boy, a complicated expression on his face.

Takoda smiled, avoiding Rollan’s eyes. “I’m not quite the person you imagined would summon a huge bloodthirsty gorilla, I’m sure.”

Meilin shrugged and cracked her calloused knuckles. “I summoned a fluffy panda. Go figure.”

“You aren’t going to like what I’m about to say,” Takoda said. “We’ve all lost much to Kovo in the past, and those wounds are not yet healed. Though he might have ... behaved poorly before, I think Kovo is trying to help you.”

“Kovo *help* us?” Meilin asked. Fury surged through her. “Help us like he *helped* the Devourer rampage across Erdas?” she spat. “As I recall, the last person he *helped* was cast aside like an old toy when he was no longer useful.”

“Just let me show you,” Takoda said. He took two slow steps back, then turned on his heel and strode toward the ape.

“Takoda, wait!” Abeke cried.

From the battlements above came the sound of drawing bowstrings and swords. Greencloak guards shouted in alarm.

Meilin launched forward on instinct, reaching her hand out to grab Takoda. But she cursed her softened instincts as her fingers reached him a moment too late, catching only the hem of his robe.

Kovo sprang.

For a creature so large, the ape was astonishingly fast. With a single push of his meaty palms against the cobblestones he was beside Takoda, red eyes blazing within the dark of his face. The ape’s fiery gaze flipped from the boy to Meilin, and the sudden intensity of it took her breath away.

Despite herself, Meilin halted, dropping into a more defensive crouch. With another crashing leap Kovo was past Takoda—and bounding straight at her.

Then the chain caught, and Kovo’s collar jerked him to a halt.

He nearly tumbled to the ground but caught himself just in time, straining against the collar, his face inches from hers. Meilin could feel the ape’s breath rustling the ends of her hair. Kovo’s teeth were bared. A few links of chain

were all that kept her from death.

Meilin, you are a warrior. She narrowed her eyes.

“No, stop!” Takoda pushed himself between the two of them, his skinny arms waving frantically. “Please, just listen. Kovo doesn’t want to fight!”

Takoda faced the gorilla, and with the boy between her and her enemy, Meilin allowed herself to rise from her defensive stance.

“Show them,” Takoda pleaded to Kovo. “*Please.*”

The gorilla’s eyes were still fixed on Meilin’s, with every bit of the calculating menace that she remembered. A raw surge of hatred passed through her. She could barely control the urge to attack.

Kovo shoved a chained hand at Takoda, knocking the boy back a step. Takoda let his hand drop, opened his satchel, and took out a roll of papyrus and a piece of charcoal. He placed them both on the ground in front of Kovo.

Meilin’s anger slowly drained as she watched Kovo take the charcoal in his powerful fingers, holding the tool with surprising delicacy. Avoiding their eyes, the ape concentrated on the papyrus and began to sketch.

“It’s always the same picture,” Takoda explained. “He even draws all the parts in the same order. It’s like he’s trying to get it all perfectly right. Like he’s trying to capture something that’s been seared into his mind.”

The gorilla started with a jaw, and the fangs came next. At first Meilin thought Kovo was drawing an animal—the Great Serpent Gerathon, perhaps. But it soon became clear that the jaw wasn’t attached to any creature. Instead, there were stones and grass in front of it, a rocky mountain behind, and a half moon in the sky above.

“Is it the fossil of a giant jaw?” Meilin asked.

Kovo dropped the charcoal and stared at her. Under the sudden onslaught of the ape’s cruel red eyes, Meilin fell back a step before she could remember her poise. Holding her head high, Meilin watched the ape trace an arc in the air, then walk through it with two fingers of his other hand.

“It’s not a fossil,” Takoda explained. “It’s a door. Wait, he’s not done. There’s one more part to it.”

Finally taking his gaze away from Meilin, Kovo picked the charcoal back up. On top of the fanged door, positioned right in its center, he drew a strange, disquieting symbol.

A twisting spiral.



THE PORTAL

WHO'D EVER GIVEN DOORWAYS MUCH THOUGHT? BUT now they were all Abeke could think about. As she and her friends passed through Greenhaven's chilly stone corridors, Abeke found herself looking up at every frame and archway. Turned out that a doorway was never just a doorway. Some had shields hung above, some were splintered wood or gleaming granite, and some had frames of molding where there had once been glass.

None of Greenhaven's doorways looked even remotely like a set of fangs.

"No one has seen anything like it," Conor said forlornly, peering at the parchment with Kovo's charcoal drawing.

"It feels like we've asked nearly everyone in Greenhaven," Abeke said.

"Why not try the library?" Meilin asked.

The other three stared at her. "Greenhaven has a *library*?" Rollan asked.

Meilin rolled her eyes and led the way, bringing them down staircase after staircase. Natural light became scarce and then disappeared, replaced by the ruddy glow of guttering torches. "I came down here to study while we were training," she said. "Didn't you guys ever get the urge to pick up a book during training breaks?"

Abeke saw Conor blush and look away. In the last six months, he'd only just begun to learn how to read.

"Uh, yeah, of course," Rollan said dryly. "I was reading, like, all the time. The bigger the book, the better, that's what I always say."

"Someday our survival will rest on knowing all about ancient Hellan rock decorating, and you're going to thank me," Meilin said, cuffing him on the

shoulder.

“Shh!” came a low, outraged voice.

They’d arrived at the library.

At the end of a dank, dim hall at the very bottom level of Greenhaven, a doorway led into a musty space. The ceiling was so low that Conor had to duck to enter. It seemed to Abeke more like a dungeon than a library.

But once they were inside, the place had a coziness to it. Rows of short bookshelves extended in every direction. They were covered in candles that flickered in the drafty chamber, dripping wax over the worn wood. The warmth of so many ruddy flames lifted some of the chill that seeped into Abeke’s bones whenever she wasn’t in Nilo.

“Erlan?” Meilin called out excitedly. “Are you there?”

“Meilin? Is that you?” came a gruff voice from behind one of the bookshelves.

Staring at the rows of dusty leather-bound books, they edged farther into the chamber, in a reverent hush. Until, that is, Rollan promptly bashed his head on an iron chandelier, which in turn swung right into a bookcase, rocking it backward. Dusty parchment flew everywhere.

“Careful, careful!” came the gruff voice.

A tiny Niloan man came into view around one of the shelves, wearing a sea-foam-colored robe with white fur trim that merged seamlessly with his voluminous white beard.

“Hello, Erlan!” Meilin said, giving the librarian a kiss on the cheek.

“Meilin!” Erlan said, delighted.

As the librarian walked toward them, Abeke became confused: For every step the small man took forward, there was a pattering of footfalls.

She saw the reason soon enough, when Erlan stepped to one side and revealed a large tortoise, its gray-blue scales the same hue as the librarian’s robe. The tortoise blinked its rheumy eyes at them and yawned.

“It’s so lovely to see you again, Meilin. I have the new edition of Shei-Lon’s *Ars Geometrica*. You’ll adore it. I’m still more partial to the Niloan edition, but that could just be because that’s what *I* grew up reading. In any case, you won’t believe the diagrams; they’re woodcut prints, and simply gorgeous. Now, where is it?”

Erlan turned in a broad circle, searching for the book. His robe dragged

against another shelf, sweeping a stack of books to the ground and spraying candlewax over the friends. Abeke and Conor followed after him, picking up the books and placing them back on the shelf as close as they could to their original order while Rollan stamped out the flaming wicks.

“I’d love to look at that book soon, but not today, Erlan,” Meilin said. “We’re here on urgent business.”

“Learning is always important business,” Erlan muttered. He kept rummaging around the shelves until the tortoise pointedly walked into the librarian’s legs to get his attention. Erlan looked down at his spirit animal, then at Meilin, and smoothed his white hair. “Sorry. Right. Urgent business, you said?”

“Yes,” Rollan said, rubbing the top of his head where it had bashed the chandelier. “Headache remedies, please.”

“Oh, sorry. I designed the library myself decades ago, and, well, I’ve never been very tall, and I suppose I forgot other people would use it, too. So let’s see,” Erlan said, scratching through his beard as he scanned the candlelit shelves. “Headache remedies. I’ll have to see what I have....”

“He was kidding,” Meilin said, scowling at Rollan.

“Says you!” said Rollan, outraged.

Meilin clamped her hand over his mouth. “Erlan, we’re looking for any reference to a doorway that looks like an open jaw.”

He rubbed his palms together. “That’s not something you hear every day.”

“Like this one,” Conor said helpfully, unrolling Kovo’s parchment and showing it to Erlan.

The old man squinted at the charcoal sketch. “Who drew this? It’s quite good, really. Exquisite use of crosshatch shading.”

“Kovo did,” Conor said. “He’s been drawing it repeatedly. He’s obsessed with it, apparently.”

Erlan instinctively recoiled. “Well, well. All the literature does point to Kovo being very smart. That was never in question.” Erlan scrutinized the drawing. “Now. What is he trying to tell us?”

After a few moments, the old man sighed. “I suppose there’s only one place for it....”

Groaning, he padded toward a candle-covered bookshelf that was already wobbling long before the librarian drew near. Abeke braced herself to leap to

the rescue, but Erlan turned before ever reaching the shelf. Instead, he faced a small stretch of blank wall nestled between all the books.

Except it wasn't a wall.

The elder Greencloak lifted a trembling hand and ran it over the bricks, finally coming to rest on one that was slightly darker than the rest. When he pressed it, ancient stones grumbled and hissed as they shifted deep in the walls, and then the bricks pivoted back, revealing a hidden room.

So many kinds of doors, Abeke thought again.

"Erlan?" Meilin said uncertainly. "You never told me there was another room here."

"No, I didn't," the librarian said wearily. "I couldn't tell anyone, not even you, Meilin. The Greencloaks have many fine qualities, but there are stories that they'd prefer to forget."

Erlan disappeared into the room, sending a breeze of cold, stale air back out in his place. Abeke shivered.

"Much of the history of the Lost Lands is contained in here," Erlan called out. "After the First Devourer War, the nation of Stetriol became a forbidden place, and knowledge of it was erased. It has taken me many, *many* years to assemble these manuscripts. Use what you discover here to help Erdas, but I'd ask you not to spread word of this collection further than you must. Not everyone would be happy to know I've been accumulating this information."

A cough, a wheeze, a puff of breath. Dust plumed out of the doorway. From within its shell, the tortoise sneezed.

"But some of these histories are older even than the Lost Lands," Erlan said, emerging from the passage with a tome bound in cracked black snakeskin. He hobbled to a broad table and laid the great book down with care. There, raised beneath the cover, was the shape of a gorilla standing on all fours.

"Kovo," Conor whispered.

"What is this book, Erlan?" Meilin asked, mistrust lacing her voice.

"I have no idea," the librarian said wistfully. "Can't read a word of it. Perhaps to keep its contents secret, it was written in a forgotten tongue—or a code. I've lost many nights trying to decipher it. But thankfully, the author was also a skilled artist." Erlan gently cracked open the cover of the book, turning each page with delicate precision.

“Here we are,” he said. As he turned the next page, the air in the cramped library seemed to still.

Despite herself, Abeke gasped. There, sketched onto the page in a delicate hand, was the exact door Kovo had drawn, waiting within a set of ragged jaws. It even had the strange spiral symbol.

Rollan whistled. “Well, isn’t that weird?”

Erlan grunted in agreement as he turned the next page. It was a map. A twisted ring of mountains curled into itself, dropping into a cone at the center, like the trap of an antlion. In the center of the ring, the spiral was drawn again into a stretch of mountainside surrounded by forest and ruined walls. This time the spiral was a deep crimson color. Abeke hoped it was just red ink.

“What is this place?” Meilin asked.

“The Petral Mountains, on the border between Eura and Zhong,” Erlan said quietly. “A very secluded stretch. No humans have lived there for quite a while.”

“This is all fine and moody,” Rollan said, “but we still don’t know that it’s connected to what’s happening with the Evertree. Kovo has tricked us before.”

“Kovo is not to be trusted,” Erlan said. “But in this case, I believe that the door *is* indeed connected to the Evertree.”

“Why’s that?” Abeke asked.

“I haven’t shown you the back cover yet.” Erlan closed the tome and carefully flipped it over.

There, raised beneath the snakeskin, was the outline of an enormous tree. But the tree was only half of the picture. A thin line bisected the image where the roots of the tree met the ground. Below the line, the roots spread out into a web of branches, as wide and tangled as the tree itself. Bundled deep within the roots, like an egg within a nest, was the familiar spiral.

“That’s why Lenori couldn’t find anything wrong with the Evertree at first,” Abeke said. “She was looking outside, but the trouble is coming from *below*.”

“So we have to go below, too,” Conor said. “And we have to start in the Petral Mountains.”

Now that Conor had said it aloud, the idea of journeying deep under the earth felt terrifying. They stared at each other in the candlelit gloom of the

basement library. Abeke saw Rollan rub his head absently where he'd struck the chandelier. How far down did the Evertree go? If this library felt low and oppressive, what would it feel like to be miles underground? She couldn't speak for the others, but she knew it was nowhere she'd want to be.

Erlan clapped his hands cheerfully, cutting the sudden gloom. "Glad to be of service!"

"Good thing I didn't unpack yet," Meilin said as the old man shuffled away. "We'll leave as soon as we can. It's too bad—after that sea voyage, I'd have loved a few nights in a soft bed."

Conor shook his head and tugged unconsciously at his sleeve.

Meilin glanced from him to Abeke with questioning eyes. All Abeke could do was shrug. It wasn't her news to tell.

"Before we make any decisions, I have something to show you," Conor said miserably. "But let's go back up to the courtyard. We'll all feel better out in the daylight."



But the daylight was nearly gone. Afternoon was rapidly declining into twilight when they returned to the courtyard, the shadows lengthening and joining as they deepened toward night.

Conor had been silent all the way out to the courtyard, and now in the waning evening light he held up a hand to stop his companions. "Takoda?" he called softly. "Would you come over here? I need your help—I don't want to get any part of this story wrong."

Takoda stood up, hands clasped within his stiff blue robe.

When the boy stepped away, Kovo startled and grunted loudly, making a flurry of signs. Takoda waited for him to finish, then made a simple sign back and pointed to Abeke and the others.

Kovo signed more and more emphatically, baring his teeth. Abeke felt her hands tighten into fists. Would Kovo attack Takoda, even though they were bonded?

Calmly, Takoda repeated the same simple sign and pointed at the group.

All was still for a moment, then Kovo strained against his chain and roared right into Takoda's face, the noise echoing across the bare courtyard. Chest heaving in anger, Kovo grunted and hurled himself heavily onto the

flagstones, his back to them. He punched the ground once, and Abeke heard a crack where the sturdy flagstone split in two.

Visibly shaken, Takoda crossed over. "I think he's ... concerned that you won't heed his warning. Sorry."

"Are you okay?" Abeke asked.

Takoda nodded, lips sealed in a straight line. "What do you need from me?"

Conor had clenched his jaw so tightly that it was shaking. Abeke put a reassuring hand on her friend's wrist, and was relieved when he let it stay.

"When we went to get Kovo and Takoda, Zerif attacked," Conor began. "He was ... different, somehow. More intense. And here was the strangest thing: He had that spiral symbol on his forehead." Conor swallowed. "While we were driving him back, Zerif uncorked a small black bottle. I managed to grab it from his hand." Conor breathed out softly.

From the center of the courtyard, Kovo turned his head enough so he could stare at them, his scarlet eyes narrowed.

"What was in the bottle?" Meilin asked.

"It was ..." Conor faltered.

Takoda spoke gently, answering for him. "It was alive. Some kind of worm."

Conor nodded, casting a grateful look at Takoda. "I chopped at it as soon as it crawled out of the bottle. I thought it was dead, but a little chunk of it wriggled up my blade and entered a cut on my wrist. And that piece ..."

Gritting his teeth, Conor rolled up his sleeve.

Though she'd already heard the story, this was the first time Abeke had seen Conor's wound. She gasped. Starting at a red scab at Conor's wrist, a tendril of gray passed up his forearm, ending slightly before his elbow. It paralleled a blue vein in the middle of Conor's arm. But while the vein was still, this tendril quivered like something alive, just below the skin.

At the elbow, where the living tendril ended, the knob of it throbbed and shifted, curling into new versions of the same shape.

A spiral.



A DESPERATE PLAN

REVEALING THE PARASITE WENT JUST AS CONOR FEARED it would. Abeke gasped and turned her head away; Rollan cast his eyes to the ground; Meilin gritted her teeth and forced herself to keep looking despite her obvious disgust. Conor watched all of it, his heart twisting. There was something bitterly wrong with him, and now he was going to lose the people he loved most in the world because of it.

Conor pulled his sleeve down low so it covered the creature. The creature *inside of him*. “I don’t know what it is,” he said. “It’s been moving ever since it entered me. I can barely sleep.”

Takoda looked at him with deep pity, and Conor hated it. He felt his face twist into a humiliated scowl. His heart was racing so much, he wondered if his friends could see his veins thudding violently under his skin.

“Hey,” Rollan said, wrapping his arm around Conor’s shoulders. “We’re going to figure this out. You know that, right?”

There was tension in Rollan’s voice. He was lying. Conor was sure of it.

“Does it hurt?” asked Meilin.

Conor shrugged Rollan’s arm off his shoulder. “Not too much. Sometimes I think if I ignored it, it might go away. It’s just so ... disgusting.”

Rollan wouldn’t give up. He threw his arms around his friend. “You’ve been disgusting ever since we’ve known you.”

Conor’s heart filled with relief. Who knew it could feel so good to be teased? But Rollan had always been an expert at it, making him feel loved even as he took him down.

Finally Conor could voice what was worrying him most: “Even though only a small piece of it got inside me, this thing is working its way up my arm. Zerif’s was in his forehead. I think that’s where it’s heading.” Conor’s stomach lurched. “What happens when it gets there?”

“It’s not possible for you to become like Zerif,” Rollan said flatly. “He’s got better hair, for starters.”

“I feel like cutting it out,” Conor said.

“Absolutely not,” Meilin said. “No way are you cutting into your arm.”

“You said even that little fragment of the parasite was able to infect you,” Abeke said. “Last thing we want to do is risk splitting it into more pieces.”

Conor shuddered, then reluctantly nodded.

“All of Greenhaven’s most capable healers have gone to help the Evertree,” Abeke continued. “Who’s left?”

“The best healer of them all, that’s who,” Meilin said. “Jhi.”



The next dawn, the friends met for an early breakfast in the Greenhaven dining room, slate-colored rain drumming the stained-glass windows. The night before, they’d marked in ink how far up Conor’s arm the creature had reached. This morning it was only a tiny bit farther.

“It’s slowed,” Conor said, sighing. “At least there’s that.”

Meilin had spent the night on the floor of Conor’s room so Jhi could be near him while he slept. The panda had worked her healing throughout the night, and though there had been benefits, they’d clearly been minimal. “Did anyone get any sleep?” Meilin asked.

Her friends stared back at her balefully.

Meilin’s hair was sticking straight up in the back. Rollan cut a glance at Conor, silently daring him to comment on it. Abeke gave them a severe look: *Don’t you dare.*

“While I was staring at the moonbeams on Conor’s ceiling,” Meilin continued, “here’s what I figured: We have two problems to deal with. Zerif is out collecting the Great Beasts as they appear. And something—probably related—is poisoning the Evertree from below.”

“Lenori will know where the Great Beasts are going to appear shortly before it happens,” Abeke said. “We could try to intercept Zerif next time, and

stop him for good.”

“Regardless, someone should check out this mysterious door and figure out what’s poisoning the Evertree,” Meilin said. “Problem is, we can’t all do both at once.”

Abeke nodded. “We’ll have to split up.”

“Okay,” Rollan said, gritting his teeth. “I don’t like it, but it’s not like we haven’t done this before. We’ll be back together before long.”

Conor watched as Meilin fixed Rollan a complicated, mournful look.

“What?” Rollan asked. “What did I say?”

Meilin switched to a stop-being-such-a-dolt look. “I’ll need to stay with Conor ... so Jhi can heal him as much as she can.”

“So? ... Oh.”

“Conor and I can check out the door,” Meilin said solemnly. “Rollan and Abeke are our best trackers, which means you two should find the other Great Beasts.”

“I could go alone,” Abeke offered.

“Absolutely not,” Rollan said, sighing. “Zerif was dangerous *before* he had a bunch of Great Beasts as his personal bodyguards.”

“Thank you,” Abeke said, sighing with relief. “I’d argue harder, but I have to admit the idea was terrifying.”

Conor wasn’t eager to follow the strange doorway into whatever darkness lay beyond it, but he couldn’t see any better option. He was terrified by the worm living inside him. What if Zerif could use it against him somehow—or against his friends?

Meilin and Rollan were staring at each other with moony longing, but Abeke looked right into Conor’s eyes. He could tell from her expression that she’d followed everything that had just passed through his mind. She lay a hand on her friend’s infected wrist. With one move she’d told him that she wasn’t scared of his sickness. Conor’s eyes stung with gratitude.

“I’ll probably regret suggesting this,” Meilin said, “but Kovo is the key to that door, which means he and Takoda should come with us when we go check it out.”

“*And* a full detail of Greencloaks,” Abeke added. “You’ll need whatever we can spare to watch him.”

“So we won’t have Kovo’s sparkling conversation to entertain us here in

Greenhaven?” Rollan asked. “That’s really such a shame.”

Abeke frowned. “Investigate the door, guys. See if it’s safe. But remember that you don’t have to do anything more than that: If that entrance is as old as we think, any tunnels beneath it may have collapsed already. Don’t get yourselves trapped.”

“With the worst enemy we’ve ever known, no less,” Conor said.

“We’ll be careful,” Meilin said, casting one last long look at Rollan. “And we’ll be back before you know it.”



THE PETRAL MOUNTAINS

TAKODA WAS FALLING BEHIND.

The monastery in Nilo had been so tranquil. The quiet, meditative men and women who had taken him in spent their days shuffling through terracotta hallways, whispering to one another in deliberative tones or meditating in the study.

Takoda had spent his life in sandals, and now he was wearing a pair of heavy boots he'd borrowed from Conor. He struggled to keep up. His life had changed so much, so rapidly. He'd left Nilo for the first time, traveled over the sea to Greenhaven, and now he was in the Petral foothills. The monks who raised him were so very far away. A lush green cloak hung around his shoulders. Takoda stroked it admiringly as they trekked.

Meilin was watching. "Remember that you're just wearing a green cloak," she said, a touch imperiously. "That's different from *being* a Greencloak."

Takoda grimaced and continued marching. Sure, he hadn't joined the order or anything, but all the same he enjoyed the feeling of the heavy cloak clasped around his narrow shoulders. He probably wouldn't say no if they asked him to be a Greencloak someday.

As if he had sensed Takoda's thoughts, Kovo grunted in irritation. Takoda realized he'd pulled a few paces ahead, and returned to the ape's side. Kovo never liked it when Takoda strayed, but the boy wasn't naive enough to think Kovo missed him.

The Greencloak delegation kept itself in a tight circle around Kovo. At first it had made Takoda nervous, but that soon turned to relief when he

realized it meant *he* wouldn't be responsible for the gorilla.

Once a spirit animal bond grew strong, sometimes the animal could disappear as a tattoo somewhere on its human partner's body. The decision to use passive form was ultimately the animal's, however, and Kovo clearly was nowhere near trusting Takoda. So the smiths at Greenhaven had fashioned Kovo a collar with two rings that attached to long poles. Two Greencloaks took up those poles now, positioned on either side of him.

Kovo suffered his indignity stoically, keeping his true feelings well hidden. The powerful gorilla clambered easily over the ground, knuckle-walking his way through brambles and thickets while the Greencloaks struggled to keep pace. As often as not Kovo had his gaze focused up in the clouds; Takoda frequently found himself following Kovo's eyes and wondering what he saw up there.

When they took their first break for the day, Kovo basked in the chill sunshine with his eyes closed, face to the breeze with a serene expression. Long before his captivity in Greenhaven's courtyard, Kovo had been imprisoned for centuries for his crimes. Even chained to two poles, he must be finding this relative freedom sweet.

The Petral foothills were like nothing Takoda had ever seen in Nilo. Brisk winds sheared off jagged, low mountains, sending waves of sharp chill down through the desperate leaves clinging to scraggly bushes. The soil was thin and pebbly, dotted with broad flat stones barbed in green moss. The whole region was one giant shallow basin; ever since they'd crested the mountains at the Eura-Zhong border, they'd been slowly descending—toward what, Takoda didn't know.

He planted his numb, red fingers under his arms to keep them at least a little warm.

"How is Olvan so fast?" Takoda asked Meilin, huffing as he struggled to make his way up a rise. His breath made little cotton puffs wherever he went. The leader of the Greencloaks was bounding over a rise half a mile ahead.

Meilin shrugged. "His spirit animal is a moose. I guess we're in a moose-y kind of place."

Meilin had brought Jhi into passive state, to spare the panda the trek. It was a moment that would forever be seared in Takoda's memory: As soon as the ground grew rough, Meilin had taken Jhi's face in her hands and they took

a good long look at each other, both of them nodding once they'd finished their wordless deliberation. Takoda couldn't imagine a spirit animal relationship more different from his own.

"Briggan is a wolf," Conor said. "But even he's finding it hard to keep up." Beside him, Briggan barked indignantly at the challenge. The wolf took off hurtling over the countryside, soon overpassing even Olvan. He took occasional leaps of pure joy.

Conor grinned after him, the worry so frequently on his face melting momentarily away.



Toward late morning, Olvan called the group to a halt on a rocky crest. "Look!" he called triumphantly.

Takoda scanned the landscape but could see nothing all that different from the rest of the steppe they'd traveled. "It's ... pretty?" he tried.

"Olvan, I see what you mean," Conor said. "It's just like the map!"

Now that Conor had pointed it out, Takoda could see it. At the lowest point in the valley, dense shrubbery closed in, masking whatever was at the bottom.

He heard a scuffle behind him, and his heart seized when he turned and saw the two Greencloaks, both barrel-chested Eurans, struggling mightily to keep Kovo in line with the collar. Kovo kept walking forward, despite his restraints. Then, with no apparent effort at all, he took a leap, yanking the poles clean out of the guards' hands.

No! Be good! Takoda signed.

Kovo stared back, expressionless. It was typical; sometimes Kovo would sign fluently at Takoda, and other times he'd pretend not to understand a single gesture. The message he sent by being so selective was unmistakably clear: *I'm the one in charge. Don't forget it.*

Conor fell into a fighting position, but Takoda laid a restraining hand on his new friend's shoulder. He wouldn't stop the Greencloaks from battling Kovo if it came to blows, but Takoda knew his spirit animal well enough to see that the ape wasn't about to attack. There was the trace of a wicked smile on his face, though—clearly Kovo had enjoyed the game of pretending that he was under their control ... and had enjoyed proving it wrong even more.

Kovo stood on all fours at the top of the ridge, scrutinizing the densely wooded basin. Olvan edged close to the ape, his moose hovering over him protectively. A shiver passed over Takoda as he watched his spirit animal—the Great Beast that had nearly conquered the world—stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the leader of the Greencloaks. With that one simple display of force, Kovo had made it hard to say who was truly in charge.

The two burly Greencloaks brought Kovo's poles back up, but the ape took advantage of the pause to barrel forward, dragging one of the men a dozen feet before the surprised Euran let go.

“Briggan, tail him!” Conor said. But the wolf was already on it. Nose low to the ground and tail pointed straight back, he shot off on the chase, his whole body taking the shape of a javelin. Conor, Meilin, and Takoda fell in behind, scrambling to keep their footing on the dim and scrabbly forest trail. Takoda heard Conor tumble beside him, but couldn't afford the time to help him up—Briggan was letting out a stream of barks so that the rest could more easily follow, but they were getting fainter as he and the ape pulled ahead.

When Conor and Takoda flagged, Meilin assuredly sprinted past, easily hurdling upturned roots and fallen trees. Takoda picked up speed as he switched from following Briggan's sounds to watching Meilin's whipping hair as she leaped and ran.

Though he couldn't risk letting his gaze leave the path for even a second, Takoda became aware of ruined walls blurring by. Beneath his feet, the ground changed from soil and moss to overgrown mosaic floors and shards of dull broken pottery. “We've entered some ancient city,” Takoda puffed to Conor. “Abandoned.”

“Maybe we're about to find out why!” Meilin shouted from up ahead.

“Be careful,” Takoda called. “Don't trust Kovo!”

“Don't you worry about that!” Meilin disappeared around a curve, then yelled back for Takoda and Conor to stop. Takoda was already barreling around the mossy brick corner, though, and nearly slammed into her. She threw her arms around him to bring him to a halt before he tumbled.

As Takoda caught his breath, he realized they were standing at the edge of what might have been a moat during a rainier season. It was only about four feet deep but a good dozen feet across, its bottom full of pine needles and dirt. It extended far into the distance on one side and stopped in a solid rock wall

on the other; they'd have to cross it to continue the trail.

Kovo must have made the same decision for himself: He was already standing on the debris clogging the moat, raised on two legs as he stared apprehensively along its length. The gorilla was perfectly motionless, and Takoda could see the tension rippling up and down his muscular legs. Clearly Kovo's footing was precarious beneath the dirt and pine needles, though Takoda couldn't see exactly why.

Stop. Return, Takoda signed.

Kovo roared and made one simple sign, his scarlet eyes glittering in anger. *No.*

"Look!" Conor said, pointing at the cluttered moat floor.

At first Takoda couldn't see what Conor was referring to. Then, glinting from below, he saw rusty spear tips where the leaves and rubble parted a far ways down. It was a trap! But the rigged pit must have been so old that it was clogged, and hadn't fired. Yet.

Stop. Return, Takoda signed again. He cursed. If only he and Kovo knew more than ten symbols, he could explain the danger.

But Kovo had already figured it out. His gaze returned to the terrain below and the stones that shifted precariously under his feet. He must have raced over the moat, and then gone still once he sensed the danger below.

But not still enough.

Kovo's weight shifted slightly, and Takoda heard a grinding sound deep underground as a mechanism started moving. Kovo flashed a desperate look at Takoda. The grinding sound intensified, and then the stones under Kovo's feet gave way. Kovo cried out and suddenly dropped, disappearing up to his waist in stones and soil.

If he'd had a moment to think, Takoda might have let Kovo continue to fall. But he saw the ape tumbling to his death, and instinct took over. Takoda dashed toward his spirit animal, over the wobbling stones of the pit floor, which fell toward the spikes with every step.

A furious light burned in Kovo's eyes, and then, in a flash, his arm was around Takoda's waist. Leaping into the air, the gorilla just managed to catch the far wall of the moat and hurl himself up. The ground beneath the moat roiled, then disappeared as rocks and debris tumbled somewhere below.

Takoda fell against Kovo, landing hard onto the ape's chest. For a

moment the two remained there in a strange embrace, struggling to catch their breath. Then Kovo pushed Takoda roughly to one side and rose on all fours.

“Are you okay, Takoda?” Meilin called.

He couldn’t seem to get enough breath in his lungs to reply. But he nodded as the stones in the pit continued to gnash and fall away.

“What do we do?” Conor asked Meilin. To Briggan, though, the right way forward was obvious. The wolf backed up, got a running start, and leaped across the churning stones of the moat.

“Go!” Conor cried to Meilin, after seeing Briggan scabble up to safety on the far side of the shifting floor.

Briggan had apparently had enough of Kovo’s chase. The wolf’s hackles raised and he took feinting lunges toward the ape, long teeth bared and growls rumbling out from deep in his throat.

Kovo and Briggan would have to fight it out themselves. Takoda’s attention was on the far side of the moat, where great gaps now appeared, revealing even more spikes. For a few moments, at least, there was still enough earth intact that his Greencloak friends might be able to pick their way across.

Meilin jumped first, aiming for the most solid section of the moat floor. She landed, but sank up to her ankles in the loose soil. It held long enough for her to leap to the next. With each hop she left fewer footing options open to Conor.

Takoda watched as the pale boy gritted his teeth and chose his own path, a few feet to one side of Meilin. Looking at the pit of rusty spears below, Takoda’s mind filled with flashing horror.

Meilin grunted as she made her final leap, only just reaching the far side. Her fingers clawed deep into rocky dirt. “Come on, Conor!” she cried.

Conor was perched on a teetering square of earth. There was only one foothold left that he could hop to in order to reach the far side, but it was already crumbling. He paused, unsure of himself, unsure of whether it would hold. Then, before Conor could act, the ground beneath him gave way and he was falling toward rusty spear points—

—until a strong arm reached out from the far side of the moat and snagged the belt around Conor’s midsection. Takoda watched in disbelief as, with impossible agility, Kovo stepped right around Briggan’s snapping jaws,

reached to fish out Conor, and hurled the boy through the air. Conor skidded along the ground and got to his feet as soon as he could, looking back to see Kovo climbing out of the half-fallen moat. The ape raised himself onto all fours, panting heavily. Briggan had ceased his attack and looked completely puzzled, his hackles still raised and one hesitant paw in the air.

“What just happened?” Conor asked, shaking his head as he staggered to his feet.

“Kovo saved your life,” Takoda said, kneeling beside the gorilla. Kovo stared furiously at his hands, clenched into tight fists in his lap. He raised one and used it to shove Takoda away.

“It wasn’t a moat,” Meilin said, peering down. “It was a trap. Whoever’s city this once was, they didn’t want anyone going farther.”

Takoda ignored her. *Thank you*, he signed to Kovo.

The ape didn’t make any response. He’d never made the signs for *you’re welcome*—or *thank you* or *sorry*, for that matter—to Takoda. Maybe he hadn’t learned them. Maybe he didn’t know the concepts.

The ape stared at Takoda, red eyes glittering. Takoda signed one more time. *Thank you*.

Kovo grunted. Then he sprang into motion, hurtling past Briggan and hustling off down the trail. A second too late, Briggan lunged at him, his jaws clamping over empty air. Briggan shook his head, surprised to have missed, then took off to follow Kovo, his teeth bared.

“Do you have any idea where Kovo is going?” Conor asked Takoda.

Takoda shook his head. “I wish I did. Kovo only signs to me when it’s useful for him.”

“Hustle, guys. We don’t want to lose them,” Meilin said. She took off after Briggan and Kovo.

“What about Olvan and the others?” Conor asked, casting a glance back along the trail. They could hear the sounds of the rest of the Greencloaks, still far off.

“They’ll have to go around or find some other way across,” Meilin said, “Kovo can’t go free. That has to be our first priority.”

Part of Takoda thought that losing Kovo sounded pretty appealing, actually. But he suspected that, for good or bad, he’d always have Kovo to deal with.

Takoda saw Briggan's tail only a short ways down the path, fur sticking out stiffly. He couldn't see what the wolf was looking at, but he was at full attention.

"What is it, Briggan?" Conor asked.

As they turned the corner, Takoda saw it.

The giant maw.

It was like the earth itself had a mouth, open and hungry, waiting for prey to fall in. Cupped in the face of a mossy shale cliff side, here were the rows of sharp teeth above and below. And above it all, carved into the cave's overhang, the symbol of a twisting spiral.

It looked like that mouth wanted to drink the world above, drink and drink, as long as it took to swallow the sky down.

Seeing the gaping maw, all Takoda wanted to do was turn around and go back. Rattled, he tried to reason with himself. *This cave entrance must have been designed to strike terror*, he scolded himself, *and you're letting it work*.

Kovo was on his feet, swaying trancelike as he stared into the opening. Then he got down to all fours and stepped forward.

"Can you get him to stop?" Conor asked Takoda. "Olvan and the others should be here for this."

"Um, no," Takoda said. "But if you want to try, be my guest."

Kovo stepped under the overhang, then disappeared into the darkness.

"He can't get away!" Meilin gasped. "Kovo has a plan, and whatever it is, I don't trust it!"

Briggan looked at Conor, waiting for him to act. But Conor was retreating inside himself, his hand nervously clutching the arm where the parasite was growing and spreading. Seeing Conor's indecision, Briggan barked.

"This is what we came here for, right?" Takoda said, lips set in a grim line. "Saving the Evertree. I'm going after him."

Steeling his courage, he stepped over the carved lower teeth and entered the gaping jaw. He could hear the others following behind him. Whether or not Takoda trusted Kovo, they were all going to follow the ape. The fate of the Evertree—of the spirit animal bond itself—depended on them.

Light had been scarce in the dense forest city, but it was pitch-dark beneath the overhang. Takoda reached at his belt for one of the skinny torches Conor had given him from the Greenhaven stock, and struck it against the

attached flint. It lit with a flurry of sparks and then a steady flame.

Takoda gasped. Scarlet eyes glittered at him, only inches away. Takoda nearly dropped the torch in fright. Steadying himself, drawing on every ounce of self-control the monks had instilled in him, Takoda forced himself to meet Kovo's gaze. The gorilla gave one grunt in his direction and made a sign: *Follow*. Then he lumbered off, his black hair soon merging with the surrounding darkness.

Meilin and Conor tight by his side, Takoda shuffled after Kovo, probing the ground with the toe of his boot to make sure they didn't walk into another chasm.

Briggan whined softly but kept moving forward. The wolf had better dark vision than the humans did, so it was a small reassurance that he was comfortable with traveling deeper into the cave.

Takoda felt a sudden cold draft, then the ground pitched unexpectedly downward. He swung the torch forward, and its light caught the trail of silver hair along Kovo's spine. The gorilla was close in front of them, staring at something farther along the passageway.

Takoda maneuvered the torch so it would illuminate whatever had caught the ape's attention.

The stone walls of the cave dead-ended at an ancient wooden door. The wood was splintered and riddled with wormholes, and probably would have fallen apart centuries ago if it hadn't been for the thick rusty bands that reinforced it lengthwise and crossways.

"Here's our doorway," breathed Meilin.

"Olvan!" Conor yelled, in the blind hope that the elder Greencloak had somehow found a way to follow. The only response was his own echo. They were on their own.

"Well, we'll just have to wait here," Meilin said. "No way we're going through that door without the others."

"That sounds wise," Takoda said, though he didn't relish the idea of waiting in this dark and mysterious cave, either. He could hear large skittering insects somewhere nearby, and the plunk-plunk of dripping water beneath the hissing of his torch.

"We should go back into the daylight and wait for them," Conor said.

Apparently Kovo didn't relish waiting by the door, either. But his solution

was different: The gorilla picked up its iron-ring handle and, before anyone could stop him, gave it a tug.

The door held firm. Briggan growled warningly, snapping his jaws.

“Stop him!” Conor said.

Meilin was the first to leap to the attack, her quarterstaff out. She streaked it toward Kovo’s head, but he pivoted and knocked it aside with a massive forearm. The quarterstaff glanced away harmlessly.

The gorilla gave the door another mighty tug.

It was Briggan’s turn to attack. The wolf lunged forward and caught Kovo’s ankle in his jaws. Kovo roared in pain but kept his footing.

Enraged, Kovo switched tactics. Instead of pulling, he battered.

Yanking his ankle out of the wolf’s jaws, the gorilla took two thudding steps before hitting the door squarely with his meaty shoulder, the poles that had once restrained him clattering at his sides. The door bent and groaned, then finally tumbled from its hinges entirely.

There was a rush of fetid air from a frigid black corridor, and an ominous rumble.

Kovo stepped in.

As soon as he did, there was a crunching sound. The heavy stone arch above the door fell an inch. The rocks shivered: They wouldn’t hold for long.

Takoda wavered. From behind him, the crunching sound got louder. It sounded like loud crackling now, almost like a giant tree being felled. He could flee back into the daylight if he wanted.

Meilin yelled, but her words were lost in the clamor.

The stone around them crackled again, a sound almost like fireworks, and then it roared. Suddenly Briggan was rushing by Takoda, sprinting into the corridor after Kovo. The kids ran after the wolf, hurtling into the passage just as the cave behind them collapsed in on itself. That door must have been holding up the great weight of stone and earth, and once it had fallen, all the rest had tumbled in, too.

“Run!” Meilin yelled, her footsteps clattering in the darkness.

Something heavy caught Takoda’s heel and he spilled, tumbling onto slick stone. The corridor slanted sharply down, and as he rolled forward he bowled into someone—Meilin or Conor—and they tumbled together. Down became up, then went back to being down. Takoda’s nose smashed into a wall. He

tasted blood in his mouth as he continued to plummet deep into the earth, only slowly coming to rest.

For a moment, all was noise. Then black stillness. Though he couldn't see any of it, rock dust must have been everywhere—every time Takoda breathed in, he coughed and gagged.

Takoda felt Briggan's tongue lick his cheek. He managed to free one hand where it was wrenched under him, and reached up to stroke the side of the wolf's snout. If Briggan was safe, did that mean the others were? The thought gave him some strength, which he used to lift his head and look around.

On his other side he discovered that the torch was still lit, sputtering against the stone nearby. Takoda took it into his sore fingers and lifted it.

Meilin and Conor were sprawled together on the other side of Briggan, laid out flat. Takoda watched them blink back at him in the darkness. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," Meilin groaned. "Just."

Conor nodded gingerly.

Takoda didn't need to ask Kovo whether he was okay. The ape was seated to one side. His black hair was covered in a soft layer of clay dust, but otherwise he seemed unaffected by the collapse. For a moment his penetrating eyes seemed to look right through Takoda. Then he turned his head and peered off into the darkness, where a corridor sloped into the void, seemingly without end.

Calmly, as easily as if it had been made of wet paper, Kovo reached up and plucked off his collar.



HUNTING

“BUT IT’S SO *CLOSE*,” ROLLAN SAID, AN UNCHARACTERISTIC whine to his voice as they sailed past the Concorba skyline. He stretched his arms as far as he could over the railing of *Tellun’s Pride II*, as if hoping to stroke the buildings.

Their ship was going right by the city where Rollan had spent his childhood. Since he’d been a homeless thief back then, Abeke hadn’t expected to see Rollan feeling nostalgic for the place. But home was always home, she knew, and that fact could never be changed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll visit Concorba on the way back,” she said. “You can give me a tour, and we’ll stop in and say hello to all the shop owners you stole from back in the day. That should be fun.”

Rollan chuckled, but it didn’t last long. Abeke noticed his hand absently toying with his green cloak. Maybe Rollan actually did want to go to Concorba, wanted to let everyone from his street urchin past know how much he’d made of himself.

“Maybe on the way back we can stop in the market and see if they have anything our friends would like,” Abeke continued quietly. “I’ll help you pick out something for Meilin.”

“She’s the one who gets to go cave diving,” Rollan said. “Meilin should be picking a gift out for *me*. Like a fossilized cave bat or something.”

It was windy on deck, and Abeke wrapped her own cloak tightly around herself, tucking it under her arms for extra warmth. Much as she tried to stay open-minded, she suspected she was never going to like northern Amaya. The people were friendly, and there were cloudless skies and vibrant woods

circling brilliant blue lakes. But it was also so *cold*. It would only get colder, too: *Tellun's Pride II* would be heading farther north into the wild lake region before they disembarked.

Rollan smiled ruefully at himself. "When Lenori sent word that another Great Beast was being reborn, I hoped she'd send us to some tropical island. Like maybe Mulop had showed up beside a pristine beach, and we could have a nice philosophical conversation with our favorite octopus while sipping from coconuts."

"Could be Ninani the Swan," Abeke mused. "Since swans spend time in the north of Amaya during the summer. It's spring now, but she might have arrived here early."

Rollan snapped his fingers. "Arax the Ram, of course! He was from Amaya."

An idea suddenly struck Abeke. "You don't think it could be ... Tellun?" The idea of it was awe-inspiring. The other Great Beasts had often deferred to Tellun. The elk had been their leader, powerful enough to imprison even Kovo.

"Tellun," Rollan said, knocking on the wooden rail of *Tellun's Pride II*. "Huh. That would be appropriate enough, wouldn't it?"

When a cry rose from the ship's crow's nest, Abeke fell into a fighting pose and prepared to summon Uraza. But Rollan laid a restraining hand on her arm. "That means the crew sighted the drop-off point. We're nearly there."

Abeke forced her shoulders to relax. She'd been tense ever since she got on board, and because Uraza hated ship travel, she didn't even have the comfort of her leopard companion to sustain her. With its burnished cherry wood, the new flagship of the Greencloaks was even more beautiful than the previous, but this trip had brought back memories of navigating with Shane all the way to Greenhaven, sharing tender moments on deck, only to arrive and discover that he'd betrayed them all. That felt so long ago now, but as much as she tried to blot him from her mind, memories of the handsome blond boy resurfaced in unexpected moments.

The ship pulled up at a simple wooden pier that jutted from the mossy banks of the lake far into the sparkling water. This was the last spot of deep water before the inlet they were traveling on dissolved into streams and

tributaries. From here they'd have to continue on foot.

Abeke and Rollan clambered below and emerged with the rucksacks they'd packed and repacked during their few days at sea, struggling on the swaying deck to get the straps over their shoulders.

"You know," Rollan said as *Tellun's Pride II* eased alongside the pier, "it might work to our advantage that we'll be hunting for our meals. Many of the people of Northern Amaya are nomadic, following the herds throughout the year. They sold meat in Concorba sometimes. Finding good hunting should also mean finding them."

Abeke's fingers strayed to the smooth Niloan wood of the short bow strapped to her back. She hadn't needed to hunt while at Greenhaven, and she missed the pleasure of it. Not the killing of the animal—that always came with a fierce sorrow—but roaming the open country, at one with the natural world.

Abeke's heavy canvas bag creaked and shifted as she stepped toward the gangplank. "We need all the luck we can get," Abeke said, "if we want to find the next Great Beast before Zerif does."

Abeke and Rollan fleetly made their way down the pier, striding out into brisk open air. Abeke opened her arms and stared up at the cloudless sky, its broad blue struck through with sunshine. She couldn't control herself—she let out a loud giggle at the beautiful and grand adventure promised by that huge sky. She practically danced off the ship.

"What's gotten into you?" Rollan chuckled. But then Essix left her perch at the summit of the ship's crow's nest and swooped over them, giving a joyful cry. Rollan, too, broke into a broad smile. When Abeke released Uraza, the leopard sprang forward, bounding over the grassy tufts that dotted the firm black soil of the Amayan earth. Abeke laughed out loud as Uraza hunted an azure butterfly, pouncing after it wherever it fled.

It felt great to be free.

"Where to?" Rollan asked.

"Anywhere!"

"No seriously, where to?"

Abeke pivoted, scanning the landscape. The land stretched flat as far as she could see, cupped on three sides by snowcapped mountains. There was a *lot* of territory to investigate. "Good question," she said, stalling.

Rollan smirked. “Erlan told us that springtime means the yak are herding and heading north. We should be able to catch them wherever we see the most green, because that’s where there’s food for them to eat.”

Abeke gaped at him, dumbfounded.

“What?” Rollan said defensively. “I can’t have a good idea every once in a while?”

“It’s a great idea,” Abeke said, smiling to herself. “Scouting the greenest area means first getting to a vantage point. I say we climb that hill over there and see what we can see.”

“Hill?! By *hill* do you mean that staggeringly high mountain?”

Abeke grinned and started off.

Rollan grumbled all the way up, but Abeke sensed he didn’t mean it. She was well aware of his sprightly step and how his eyes shone whenever he looked up at the brown arc of Essix wheeling in the bright sky. Abeke felt her body limbering during the hike, long-unused muscles stretching and lengthening.

It was late afternoon by the time they crested the summit, orange scatters of light from the declining sun bursting over the landscape. Between dense stands of pine were rolling expanses of emerald grass, and passing along one of those swaths was the largest herd of animals Abeke had ever seen. There were so many of them that at first Abeke thought she was seeing a river.

“Amayan Yak,” Rollan reported. “I used to see their pelts for sale in the Concorba market, but I’ve never seen a live one before. Any hunter worth her salt in this region will be tailing them.”

“Which means we need to be tailing them as well,” Abeke said. “Though I don’t think we’ll be reaching that herd by sundown.”

“Time to make camp,” Rollan said. “And let’s do it somewhere other than this windy mountaintop, please.”



The next day, they made better time than Abeke had predicted; it wasn’t yet midday before they’d reached the edge of the herd. A pair of elderly yaks were lagging behind, ribs stark under their patchy fur. Though either of them would make for an easy kill, Abeke resisted stringing her bow and taking one down. She and Rollan had discovered fresh water and plump breadtree buds

near their campsite, and they'd filled their bellies without needing to hunt.

It became clear that Abeke had made the right choice when the pair of yaks parted and revealed a calf between them, no more than a few days old, poking its way forward on knocking knees. Perhaps its own mother had died, and this elderly pair was caring for the little beast. It, too, would make for an easy kill. Though Abeke had spared these yaks, she knew that another hunter easily might not; they'd strayed too far from the herd and were easy pickings.

Beside her, Rollan made a loud clicking noise at the back of his throat. All three yaks stilled, heads raised. From where he and Abeke were hidden in a thatch of plainsgrass, Rollan clicked again. The yaks startled and raced back toward their herd.

"What do you think you're doing?" Abeke asked.

"They need to be back with the safety of their kind," Rollan said indignantly. "I only—"

"You clearly don't know herding animals!" Abeke pointed to the herd, where the three scared yaks were joining the rest, bleating their heads off. Alarmed, the thousands of yaks took off at high speed. The resulting roar shook the countryside, the ground rumbling.

"Oh," Rollan said quietly. "I think I caused a stampede."

"Yes," Abeke sighed. "You definitely caused a stampede."

Giving up on remaining camouflage, Abeke took off sprinting toward the herd. Rollan and Uraza followed, the leopard loping quickly through the grass, soon overtaking Rollan. Her spots might not blend in with this northern environment, but Uraza could still move more quietly than any other creature Abeke had ever known. Though the yaks were fast, between Uraza on the ground and Essix soaring overhead, they'd have no trouble locating the herd once it calmed down.

After half an hour of tracking, they came to a bottleneck where the forest closed in on either side, choking the plains tight. The herd had to slow as it passed through. "Let's keep ourselves a few hundred paces behind," Abeke called. "Don't forget our goal is to find whoever's hunting this herd, not to stress the animals."

Rollan nodded and slowed. "We could use a break anyway," he panted. Uraza stared at him—a little disdainfully, Abeke thought—and then returned her alert gaze to the herd as it pulled ahead. Abeke gave the frustrated leopard

a comforting pet on the flank.

The herd slowed even more, and Abeke and Rollan fell farther and farther behind to wait it out. Once the yaks were clear of the trees, the friends could finally continue forward. The woods edged in as they passed through the bottleneck—the narrowest point was only a few paces away. Abeke peered in curiously as she passed but could see nothing moving.

The same wasn't true for the other side, though. Abeke heard a yowl behind her and turned just in time to see a mountain lion launch out of the woods at her, claws outstretched and ready to rend her apart.

Caught by surprise, Abeke gasped and stumbled.

The tawny, muscular cat hadn't counted on Uraza, though. The leopard was instantly on the attack, leaping so her own body impacted the mountain lion's before it could strike Abeke. The two cats tumbled in the dirt, rolling until they crashed into the side of a boulder.

It was a close match. Uraza was longer, but this cat was more muscular. It gashed the leopard with its powerful back claws, and Uraza howled in pain.

Abeke immediately had her bow off her back and struggled to get it strung, cursing herself for not having predicted an ambush. Rollan's dagger needed no preparations, though, Abeke saw from the corner of her eye as he ran toward the cats. Essix shrieked in the air, probably set to dive in and join the combat.

They would have had this under control. If the mountain lion had been alone.

Abeke felt a sharp pain in her spine, and suddenly her body no longer obeyed her commands. She dropped slackly to the earth, the agony in the back of her neck eclipsing all else. Though she couldn't see what it was, there was a vise on her spine, pushing ever tighter, and she felt a hot line of blood—her blood—stream down her face as she lay still. *My spine*, she thought. *Something is trying to crush my spine.*

Then there was a rush of air, and a falcon's scream sounded in her ear. The vise on her neck lifted, and Abeke was able to get her arms under herself enough to see Essix rolling with a second mountain lion. Brown and white feathers flurried into the air.

The element of surprise had allowed Essix to get the mountain lion off Abeke, but the falcon stood no chance in an open combat against a ferocious

cat. Fortunately, Rollan was soon upon them. He struck wildly with his dagger, opening a gash along the mountain lion's midsection. Howling, the cat disengaged from Essix and limped away. The falcon hopped into the air but flopped back to ground, one wing dragging, clearly wounded.

The first mountain lion had wriggled free of Uraza and the two faced off against each other, circling in the dirt while they made low growls, fangs bared. As the second lion limped off after the departing yak herd, though, the first one broke away and followed.

Rollan was immediately upon Essix, murmuring words of concern, his arms around the wounded bird. While Essix held her beak closed, stoically silent, Rollan gently probed her wing. "I don't think it's broken," he said, relieved. "Just strained."

Uraza came over and tenderly nudged Essix's wingtip with her nose, making soft concerned meows. Then the leopard turned her attention to Abeke, and when Abeke saw her companion's anxious expression, she realized that her own injuries were the more serious. She pressed her hand against her neck and grimaced when it came back red with blood.

She cautiously turned her head from side to side, and though the movement was painful, it wasn't overly limited. She had a couple of puncture wounds; that was the extent of it. They must have been bleeding so much because they were near her head. She'd had similar injuries before, and she'd gotten over them.

"A rookie mistake," Rollan said ruefully. "We should have realized that more than human hunters would be attracted to this herd of yaks."

"Yes," Abeke said, ripping off a strip from the hem of her shirt and wrapping it tight around her neck. As she did, though, she looked up and saw the mountain lions had regrouped and were going after a new target—the baby yak. It had fallen behind the rest of the herd. Its elderly caretakers stood a few yards away, groaning worriedly but too weak to confront the mountain lions directly.

Normally Abeke would let the natural order take care of itself—maybe this baby yak wasn't meant to live. But then she remembered the jaw around the back of her neck, and Essix's limp wing, and fury rose in her. Her fists clenched and unclenched helplessly. Before she knew it, she'd gotten to her feet. Blinking back light-headedness, she stalked toward the lions, fitting an

arrow to her bow.

The panicking little yak was darting this way and that, crying out to its caretakers, begging them to come help him. But the mountain lions were relentless, keeping themselves between the yak and its protectors, edging nearer and nearer to the terrified animal.

Fresh blood was streaming down Abeke's neck, more than she would have expected, and she found it hard to run straight. As she staggered forward, she struggled to string her bow. She wrapped the line around time and again until it held, then pulled an arrow from her quiver with shaking arms. Somewhere behind her, Rollan was calling out, but she couldn't hear him—the whole world was sounding at once, roaring through her head.

The first lion had just made a nip at the baby yak's rear leg when Abeke got near enough to fire. She pulled back the bowstring as quietly as she could, but in her disoriented state, she lost her balance and crushed a stick beneath her heel.

The mountain lions looked up, fully alert, and soon spotted their stalker with her bow and arrow. The little yak looked around in confusion as its would-be killers sped away. Bleating, the baby ran to its elders, and together they headed back to the safety of the herd.

Despite Rollan's cries, Abeke sprinted after the lions. There was a flash of yellow as Uraza cut right in front of her path. What was the leopard trying to do, trip her? "Get out of the way!" Abeke yelled.

But Uraza cut in front of her again, looking up at her with those luminous purple eyes.

More blood ran down her chest, and suddenly the sky was white instead of blue. Abeke staggered forward, sensing Uraza's soft presence at her side as she did. The world began to spin. As she stumbled forward, she became aware of people emerging from the woods all around the clearing, figures with brown skin and thick, braided black hair.

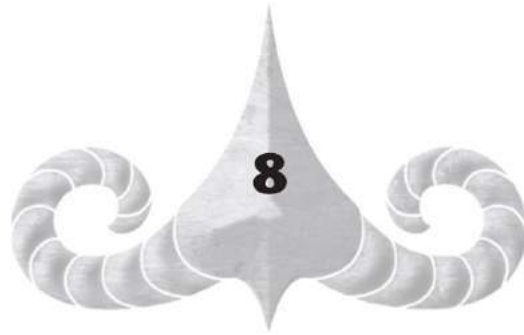
There, too, was the green of the trees, a bed of fallen needles, and that white sky, so white it was cold, a cold that took the world spinning even faster so her feet couldn't stay level upon it, couldn't dig in hard enough to keep her upright.

Abeke fell against warm Uraza, then tumbled onto her back. She tried to force herself upright again, but couldn't.

Her vision turned yellow as Uraza stood directly over her, making a sound Abeke had come to recognize as her protective yowl. Tentatively, Abeke slid out from under the leopard, hand tight on the fabric binding her neck. It was wet with blood.

Abeke couldn't get her eyes to focus. She closed them for a long moment and struggled to open them again. When she did, she had a moment of clear vision and gasped.

She was surrounded by men and women. They were scowling, furs tied around their powerful shoulders. Every last one of them had a spear. And every last one of them had the tip pointed at her.



STONE

STONE WASN'T SILENT. MEILIN REALIZED THAT MUCH AS she trudged along the dark tunnel. There were the sounds she and the others made, of course—Briggan's panting, Kovo's grunts as he knuckle-walked over sharp shards, the syllables of Takoda's meditations, and the soft patter of Conor's boots under the fizzle-splatter of his sparking torch. But the heavy weight all around them made its own noises, too.

Though the stone under their feet wasn't wet, there was water everywhere, running through distant cave systems. Meilin heard constant skittering sounds as small creatures fled, vanishing long before Conor's torchlight reached them.

One time, the escaping creature hadn't sounded small at all. It sounded like footfalls running away—something the size of a human. When they heard it, Meilin cut glances at Conor and Takoda, pointedly avoiding Kovo. Takoda looked back, a finger over his mouth, signaling for silence.

What option did they all have but to continue forward?

The most constant sound was sighing rock. It was a crunching, ominous rumble, like the earth was one huge creature grinding its teeth in a restless sleep. In the darkness, Meilin began to imagine that they were walking down an enormous gullet, that the beast might at any time decide to swallow them all.

So far there hadn't been any options for where to turn, but after sloping downward for a mile, the tunnel branched into two narrow openings. They were in a small, round chamber in the rock, mushrooms along the floor and a

puddle of water in the middle. A stalagmite rose from within, covered in moss that gleamed wet and purple in the torchlight.

“Left or right?” Meilin asked.

Takoda shrugged and answered in his soft, melodious voice. “Left and right are not what I’m concerned about. What worries me is that neither Briggan nor Kovo will fit in those tunnels.”

Surprising even herself, Meilin whirled on Takoda, rage making her whole body rigid, her hands tightened into fists. “I don’t care where Kovo does or does not fit! He’s lucky we don’t find the narrowest tunnel we can and leave him trapped down here forever.”

“Meilin,” Conor said in low tones. He placed a tentative hand on her back. “I’m as angry as you are. But we’re stuck down here. We’ll need one another to get out of this alive. Let’s save our fight with Kovo until once we’ve found the surface.”

The fear in Conor’s eyes said what his words didn’t—there might not *be* a way out.

Kovo met Meilin’s gaze challengingly and let out a long, lewd snort, flapping his lips at the end of it so they sprayed spit on her.

“Takoda,” Meilin said, her words slow and deliberate, “can you sign to Kovo that if he ever dares do that again, I will smash his brains out with my staff?”

“I don’t know those signs,” Takoda said with a worried expression.

Meilin missed Rollan all of a sudden. She could really use his sense of humor right now.

“Kovo did save Conor back at the pit,” Takoda said. “I’m not trying to defend him, but I don’t know why he would do that if his goal all along was to trap us. He made a mistake, that’s all.”

Seeing the gorilla’s glittering, ferociously intelligent eyes, Meilin wasn’t so sure Kovo was the type to make mistakes. But as her rage ebbed, she saw Conor’s point: They all needed one another if they hoped to survive. The horrible weight of the creaking stone pressing down all around them was putting her on edge. If it’s what it took to survive, she’d call a truce with Kovo until she saw the sun again. Whenever that was.

Sighing, Meilin beckoned Conor to the two tunnel entranceways so they could inspect them together. Takoda was right—it would be tricky for the

three of them to fit through either one. There was absolutely no way Briggan or Kovo could make it.

“I can bring Briggan into his passive form, of course,” Conor said. “But ...” His voice trailed off as he looked at Kovo.

Takoda lowered himself so he sat cross-legged in front of Kovo, staring into the beast’s eyes. For a few seconds, Kovo looked everywhere but at Takoda—down both tunnels, up into the ceiling, into the torch reflection in the puddle of dark water. Then finally, sulkily, he met Takoda’s eyes.

Meilin was surprised to see not just reluctance in the ape’s expression, but something else—a twinge of anxiety.

Takoda made a series of hand gestures, finishing by tracing the spot on Conor’s forearm where Briggan went into tattoo form. Takoda traced the same area on his own arm.

Kovo looked up at the ceiling for a long moment. Gradually his gaze shifted back to Takoda, then he bowed his head. His eyes glittered, catching even more of the torchlight. He bared his teeth and suddenly roared, beating his chest with his fists.

Meilin and Conor sprang into action. Conor had his fists clenched, and Meilin held her quarterstaff out in guard position.

“No!” Takoda said, right into Kovo’s face.

Meilin wasn’t sure if Takoda had been speaking to them or to Kovo. It didn’t matter, because it was Kovo who got the message. He lowered his chin to his massive chest and sighed a long, puttering sigh.

Kovo made one sign, tracing laurels on the top of his head. Then he delicately placed his thumb between his teeth and bit it.

“King. Worthless,” Takoda translated. He shook his head severely and made the thumb-biting gesture again. “Not worthless.”

Kovo looked at the boy for a long moment, misery etched in his face. Then, with a shimmering flash and a popping sound, the ape vanished.

He reappeared, not as a tattoo on Takoda’s forearm, but on his chin and neck. The image of a gorilla, charging forward with teeth bared, went from the tip of Takoda’s sharp jawline and down his throat, Kovo’s foot stepping on the boy’s collarbone.

Takoda stared in disbelief where Kovo had just been sitting.

“Congratulations,” Meilin said without much enthusiasm. “You and the

enemy of Erdas are closer than ever.”

“In the spirit of being as honest as I can be with you,” Takoda said. “I have to tell you that I *miss* him.”

“Then that makes one of us,” Conor said. Wincing at his own gibe, Conor cast a guilty glance at Takoda. “But I get what you mean. It’s not your fault who you were bonded to. Come on, Briggan.”

At the sound of his name, the wolf nuzzled Conor’s hand. And then, with another shimmer and pop, Briggan disappeared into tattoo form.

Conor stood before one tunnel and then the other, shining the torch down each in turn. “They look identical to me,” he said.

Meilin stood back-to-back with Takoda. “My shoulders are the narrowest of the three of us, just barely. So let me go first and report back. I’ll try the left tunnel, because it seems to slope upward. Since we keep hearing those dripping sounds, I’d rather not end up falling into an underground lake.”

“Good thinking,” Conor said, shuddering. He handed Meilin his torch, then quickly retracted his hand. It was the one with the parasite.

Meilin could only imagine how it would feel to have something like that growing inside of her. Probably not too unlike being bonded to a villain like Kovo, actually. What a state they were all in. She squeezed Conor’s shoulder encouragingly. “I’ll be fine, don’t worry about me.”

“Good luck,” Takoda said. “We’ll be right here if you need help.”

At least their conversation had temporarily gotten Meilin’s mind off the mass of stone over them. Before her nerves could get the better of her, she started down the tunnel. She had to crouch from the start, but as the path narrowed more, it became clear she’d only be able to move forward on her elbows. She lowered herself onto the smooth rocks of the tunnel floor and began to wriggle her way along.

She smelled something burning and realized it was a piece of her own hair. The fumes from the torch were way too close—she’d have to extinguish it. Reluctantly, she pressed the tip against the tunnel wall until the flame went out.

She continued forward into the tight, constricting darkness.

Weight. That was all Meilin could sense as she wedged one shoulder then the other into the narrow tunnel of rock. Above her were tons of solid, heavy stone. All it would take is one shudder, one tremor in the rock, for it all to

collapse on top of her. This giant stone beast would swallow her down.

Focus, Meilin. One arm eased forward, then she wriggled the rest of her body behind. She could feel her body pucker and bruise wherever she passed over even the slightest pebble.

Somewhere behind her, Conor was saying something, but she couldn't hear him—her own body had nearly sealed the tunnel tight. All she wanted was to turn back and see the sky again. But now that the opening had collapsed, they had no other options.

Meilin paused. The rock was grinding again.

Her breath came short, and suddenly her only instinct was to struggle, to push back against the rock, to do whatever she could to fight it off. But if the weight was about to fall in on her, then fighting would only make it happen faster. She martialled all the discipline of her warrior training and forced her body to be still.

She could feel the stone shiver against her, pressing her ribs in tight. Tears welled in Meilin's eyes, and her breath came only in rapid gasps.

Then the pressure relented, and the rock was still. Meilin thought of the stone bridges she had helped build in Zhong, how they would sway—but not fall—as their stones contracted and expanded. Maybe the same thing was happening here. Steadying her breath, she forced herself to continue wriggling forward in the darkness.

The tunnel narrowed even more—how was that possible? If she continued this way and got wedged tight, how would Conor and Takoda free her? Maybe they wouldn't be able to. She'd starve or die of thirst. If scavenging animals didn't get her first.

Stop it, Meilin. Terror is your enemy.

She continued forward, using the little free space under her hands to brush the tunnel clear as she wriggled, to gain her even the tiny space that the rock dust took up. Her shoulders wedged tight once, and then she managed to free them, her collarbone wrenching painfully before she could continue forward, now with arms down by her sides.

Relief. A cool, sulfurous breeze hit her face. She'd never been so grateful for something so stinky. As Meilin moved forward, her head and shoulders came free into an open space.

Her first impulse was to hurl forward into freedom, but she stopped

herself.

She desperately wished she had space to relight the torch. As she eased forward, the top half of her body was hanging in the sulfurous open air, but her hands were still pressed into her sides. She flailed around, hoping to contact a nearby ledge or bit of ground. But it was all open. What would she do now? She might be a couple of feet above the ground, or the bottom could be hundreds of feet away.

Meilin figured it was best to lean down as far as she could manage and use her fingertips to test whether there was any ground beneath. Leaving the torch pinned against her waist, she wrenched her hands free and felt down and all around. There was nothing below. She'd have to use her feet instead, which would reach farther.

Once enough of her was free, she reversed her grip and eased her legs out. Now her feet dangled low, while only the strength of her fingertips prevented her from falling. She felt a sudden need to summon Jhi, to have the comfort of her companion. But Jhi couldn't fit into the tunnel, and the idea of summoning the panda into open air and watching her plummet was too horrifying to consider.

"Conor?" Meilin called.

She heard his faint reply from the far end of the tunnel. "Yes?"

She realized there was nothing she could ask him for. What would happen next was all up to fate. "Wish me luck!" she called.

"What's happening?" came his distant voice.

"Just wish me luck!"

Meilin stretched her toes, hoping to contact ground. No success. Her fingers began to strain. Then, unexpectedly, a rock came free under one hand and slipped away.

She free-fell for a long second, then struck something soft. Meilin heard a ghastly cry from beneath her and rolled off whatever living thing she'd hit. Something was panting near her.

Then she felt a hand on her chin.

Shouting in panic, Meilin reeled backward, flailing in the darkness. She fell from whatever perch she'd been on. She dropped for another horrible moment, then struck pebbly ground and something wet.

Meilin staggered desperately through the darkness, hands outstretched.

She contacted another warm body, smooth and hairless and strangely oily, and kicked out. The creature, whatever it was, gasped and fell back. Meilin turned in a slow circle, looking all around her but finding only blackness, fists out and ready to strike. “Hello?” she said.

“What do you see?” Conor called.

The torch! Of course—there was a second torch at her waist! Cursing herself, she patted her waist until she found the handle, then struggled to free it.

Before she could light it, though, more hands were on her. They clutched and pulled, tearing her skin. Then sharp fingernails were on her face, yanking at her ears, scraping her cheeks.

Meilin screamed.



THE MANY

CONOR PACED HELPLESSLY, THEN HELD STILL WHEN HE heard Meilin screaming from the far side of the tunnel. When he called out for her and she didn't respond, he prepared to leap into the shaft. "Takoda!" he cried. "Follow me!"

"If Meilin is in trouble," Takoda said behind him, "whatever happened to her will happen to you, too. Think, Conor!"

"I don't care about being reasonable! She needs us!" Conor yelled, whirling with his second torch.

The ruddy light illuminated Takoda's face dramatically, casting shadows down the gorilla tattoo stretching along his neck. "If she's been attacked, you'll head into it face-first, with no way to defend yourself," Takoda said.

"You have more in common with Kovo than you think," Conor snapped. "We're going now!"

Takoda nodded wearily. "I was afraid you wouldn't budge. Okay, let's head in."

Conor handed the torch to Takoda and had begun to wriggle through the tunnel again when Takoda grabbed his ankle.

"Hold on," Takoda said. "Do you hear something?"

Conor realized he could hear scuffling sounds farther along in the tunnel. "Meilin?" he called out. "Is that you?"

The scuffling got nearer.

"Meilin?" Conor called again.

Still no answer. "Back up, back up!" Conor screamed at Takoda.

As Takoda scrambled out of the tunnel behind him, Conor did his best to

wriggle in reverse, hustling as fast as he could.

They came free into the chamber, where Takoda pulled in front of Conor and brandished the torch.

A figure, just Meilin's height and weight, raced toward them. "Oh, thank Tellun, Meilin, you're—"

But it wasn't Meilin.

Conor and Takoda fell backward in terror as a scrawny human figure scabbled out of the tunnel on all fours, its twisted yellow fingernails clicking against the stone ground. It was a ghastly gray-white, with barely a hair on its head. Its eyes were wide and pink, and before Conor's eyes the giant black pupils contracted to pinpoints—the torchlight seemed to have the monster dazzled. It froze, its long, skinny arms dragging on the ground.

"What is that?" Conor whispered, reeling backward.

"I don't know," Takoda whispered back, fear tightening his voice. "But look at its forehead."

Conor had assumed it was dirt, but could see clearly now that the creature had a symbol on its forehead—a spiral, just like the one on Zerif's forehead, and on his own arm. He had no time to reflect on it, though, as at that moment another of the strange creatures emerged from the tunnel—then a third, and a fourth.

"We have to get out of here!" Takoda yelled.

"What about Meilin?" Conor said.

This time, the creatures heard them. They pressed their milky eyelids shut and lunged at the boys blindly, clawlike fingernails outstretched, clashing whenever they struck the chamber's stone walls. Conor and Takoda instinctively fell back, tumbling to the ground and scuttling backward on all fours.

Whether summoned by Takoda or appearing from his own will, Kovo was suddenly back among them. With a pop, the gorilla appeared in the round chamber, seizing the torch where Takoda had dropped it in one clean motion. He stood over the kids protectively, the flaming light tight in his strong black hand. Now that their eyes were closed, however, the creatures were no longer scared of the light. They lurched toward them, slowly circling the round cavern, easing closer and closer. Mightily as Kovo swung the torch, it did nothing to keep them at bay.

All the while, more and more monsters emerged from the tunnel.

One of them contacted Conor, wrapping a clammy and surprisingly strong hand around his wrist. Conor cried out and whirled in an attempt to break free. The creature gnashed its sharp teeth in the air, trying to get them around his forearm.

Takoda had a slender knife out—his only weapon—and stepped toward the monsters, slashing wildly. Kovo roared and motioned for them to return to his side. Though in any other situation he'd have been reluctant to take orders from his former enemy, Conor willingly pressed his back tight against Kovo's, while Takoda did the same.

Kovo wrapped one strong hand around the leg of the nearest ghoulish creature and, with a grunt, whipped it into the air, flailing the limp form into the surrounding monsters. Then Kovo threw the lifeless body to one side, roaring and beating on his chest.

The torch tumbled away in the process, and Conor scrambled to pick it up. As he did, one of the monsters leaped onto his back. Conor staggered about, backing into walls, desperately trying to free himself. But more creatures continued to pour out of the tunnel. Another latched on to Conor's back while he was still fighting off the first.

With a furious roar, Kovo set himself on the creatures thronging them, one powerful arm plucking monsters from Conor and the other from Takoda. As Kovo bent over in his task, three of the ghouls leaped onto the gorilla's back, with more behind them clamoring to get on. Even mighty Kovo staggered under their combined weight, bleeding from multiple bites.

Conor summoned Briggan. The wolf appeared in midair and leaped to the attack, whirling and lunging as best he could in the close quarters of the dark cave, dancing in and out of the torchlight as he pounced and wheeled, pale ghastly creatures falling under his jaws time and again.

Kovo used the surprise of Briggan's appearance to press the offensive, reaching to the ground and heaving up whatever debris his hands found on the cave floor. Heaps of rock flew into the air, strafing their attackers. But more and more creatures continued to pour through the tunnel.

"Meilin!" Conor yelled. She'd been right where these monsters emerged from, and the thought of it filled his heart with icy dread. Conor couldn't stand to imagine what the ghouls had already done to her. "Too many to

fight!” he gasped. “We need to retreat before they block the tunnel to the surface.”

“They’ll easily chase us down!” said Takoda.

One of the creatures got its jaw around Kovo’s ankle. The gorilla roared in pain, nearly losing his footing before Briggan managed to hurl it away. But Briggan was having trouble of his own: A creature ripped its sharp yellow fingernails into his ear. The wolf’s blood gleamed in the torchlight.

Conor felt his own flesh tear as one of the beasts clawed at his throat. It was all he could do to jam its forehead away with the heel of a hand, but as he did his fingers slid into the creature’s open mouth. If it clamped its sharp teeth down, Conor might lose them all in one bite.

The creature began to bite down.

But then the world filled with light.

Dazzled, Conor looked up into the blinding white flash, blinking as he whisked his hand free. Tears streamed down his face. He couldn’t see anything beyond the afterglow that had burned purple into his vision. He heard Briggan whining in pain nearby and staggered toward the sound, finally making contact with his spirit animal’s coarse fur. Kovo panted nearby, and Conor could hear Takoda groaning not far away.

Conor’s eyes gradually adjusted enough that the cave resolved into view. Lavender light seeped from a stone lying in the middle of a puddle on the cavern’s floor. Conor realized it was some strange kind of flare, giving off ever-weakening light.

The light bomb seemed to affect the ghoulish creatures much more strongly. They were laid out flat on the floor, whimpering and quivering, fingers clamped over their eyes. Already the first was struggling to regain its feet in the dwindling light.

“Up here!” came a female voice high above them, on the far side of the cavern.

Conor looked up, shielding his eyes as best he could from the painful lavender glow. A slender figure stood at the edge of a hole high up in the cavern’s ceiling. “Meilin? Is that you?” Conor asked, confused.

“No,” the girl said. “No time to explain—these monsters won’t be stunned for much longer. Hurry up!”

Still dazed, Conor watched the girl lower a rope down the twenty feet or

so from the entrance. With a familiar pop, Briggan disappeared into his tattoo. “Takoda!” Conor said. “Get Kovo into his passive state! Hurry!”

Takoda bit his lip. “I’m trying!”

Kovo took it into his hands—literally. He placed his large, hairy fists on top of Takoda’s shoulders and stared deeply into the boy’s eyes. Then Takoda gasped, like he’d been punched, and in a flash Kovo became a tattoo on the boy’s neck. Conor shook his head. *Of course* it would be Kovo who got to decide precisely where to become a tattoo—and then place himself in such a prominent position.

The two boys stepped over the moaning and shifting bodies, stealing toward the rope. Conor gave it one tug to test it, and then held it out to Takoda. The slender boy easily clambered up. Conor followed, working his way up the slick length of braided fiber, all the way to the top. He hurled himself over the edge and sprawled out flat, gasping for breath.

“No rest yet,” the mysterious girl said, still only a silhouette before Conor’s seared retinas. “Help me pull this up, quick!”

Conor couldn’t find the strength to stand but he rolled onto his belly and, together with Takoda and the girl, heaved on the rope. A creature had just reached it as they whisked it up. The ghastly beast beat its fists against the cavern wall in frustration.

Conor lay on his back, gasping. He couldn’t muster the strength to resist when the girl removed one of the torches from his belt and lit it.

“What a marvelous thing, these lights,” she said. Clearly the illumination was painful for her. Although she closed her eyes to slits, they streamed tears, even in the dim light.

When Conor propped himself up, he saw a girl about his own age and pale as ether, with short white hair and eyes that were a soft pink. She was like a beautiful, delicate version of the creatures below. Even so, Conor found himself staggering back against the tunnel wall in fear, preparing to summon Briggan.

“It’s okay,” came a voice Conor knew as well as his own. “She’s a friend.”

Conor gave a sob of relief.

Meilin crept into the torchlight, a smile on her face. “I fell right into the nest of those things. Xanthe swept down from above and helped me out on

one of her rope ladders. These caverns are honeycombed with passages above. She knows all of them. We had to go the long way around, and raced through the tunnels to the top of the cavern as soon as we could.”

“You were attacked by the beings my people call the Many,” the girl said in a delicate and unfamiliar accent. “The only defenses we have against them are our tunnels. There’s a whole system of ladders and traps. You wouldn’t have stood a chance, two boys against all of them.”

She doesn’t know we have spirit animals, Conor realized. On instinct, he decided to keep Briggan and Kovo a secret until he knew more about this mysterious girl. Takoda clearly had the same thought: He slyly buttoned his borrowed green cloak tight, so that its cowl hid his neck up to the chin.

“What *are* those things?” Conor asked.

“You saw the symbol on their foreheads? They used to be like my people, but they ... changed. There will be time later to explain, but it’s not safe to linger in the territory of the Many. Please, come with me.”

Conor’s stomach dropped, though he tried to hide it. Seeing those monsters might have been seeing his own future. Trying to keep his terror out of his face, he shot a look at Meilin and Takoda. *Not any other option but going along with her, is there?* They shot him similar glances back.

Before they headed up the tunnel, Meilin clasped Conor close to her. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she said loudly. Then she whispered: “Keep the spirit animals a secret.”

She’d had the same instinct as he and Takoda.

They passed down the tunnel, Xanthe taking the lead, crouching and moving ably forward on all fours. She wore a simple charcoal-colored shift, woven from some shimmering material that Conor had never seen before. She carried no weapons that he could see.

He took in her white-pale skin. Even though this stranger had saved their lives, Conor found it hard to blot the monsters Xanthe had called the Many from his mind.

As they crept down the tunnels, Xanthe looked back admiringly at the torch in Conor’s hand, though it still made her eyes stream tears. “Such a marvelous thing. All the lights we have down here are so temporary in comparison.”

Conor smiled and shook his head. “I never thought a torch was that

special. We have so many of them where we're from."

"Where is that?" Xanthe asked, her tone studied and neutral.

"Aboveground," Meilin said.

Xanthe stopped, hands clasped in front of her mouth. Her eyes shone with awe. "That's what I'd hoped. But I hadn't dared assume it."

"Why is being from above so special?" Conor asked.

"Because it's been a thousand years since anyone traveled here from the surface," Xanthe said. "You've come to stop the Wyrms, as my people have long hoped. We've been waiting centuries for you to save us. Welcome to the land of Sadre."



THE HEALER

TRY AS SHE MIGHT, ABEKE COULDN'T MAKE THE WORDS she was hearing come together into anything that had meaning. In front of her wavering vision, so close to her nose that it appeared double, a spear tip trembled in the air. Abeke held perfectly still—partly to keep the armed tribespeople calm, and partly because of the puncture wound on her neck. Uraza was hunched protectively over her torso, making low warning growls and batting away any spear tips that came too near.

Keeping her hands open along the ground to prove she wasn't reaching for a weapon, Abeke lowered her head and placed her hopes in Rollan.

Essix wheeled above, giving an occasional falcon cry, so Abeke knew that Rollan must be near. He was probably hiding at the forest line, waiting to see if it was safe before he came forward.

"Hello, there!" she heard Rollan call.

Or not.

Instantly, half the spear tips disappeared from Abeke's vision, warriors grunting as they prepared to hurl their weapons.

If this standoff came to battle, Abeke needed to be ready. Gritting her teeth, hoping she wouldn't pass out, Abeke grabbed the nearest spear shaft and yanked. The weapon didn't come free, but she was able to pull herself up it so she was on her feet. Instantly, though, the world buckled under her, and she was back down on her knees. Uraza stood over her, growling to warn off any attackers.

"Hold!" Rollan called. "We mean you no trouble!"

The tribespeople conferred with one another in their own language, then one of them spoke in Common. “Drop your weapon, stranger.”

“I’ll drop mine if you drop yours,” Rollan called.

“Do as they say, Rollan,” Abeke managed to croak. “I’m in no condition to fight, and we need their help.”

She heard a thud as Rollan sighed and dropped his dagger. From high above, Essix shrieked indignantly. Giving in easily wasn’t her or Rollan’s style.

“Thank you,” said the same voice. A woman knelt into Abeke’s vision. She had a sun-wrinkled face, a striking mixture of tans and ruddy reds, and surprisingly kind eyes. An infant was wrapped tightly to her chest with a length of yak hide, only the top of its head poking out.

Uraza struck out at the woman with her paw. Her claws were retracted, but it served as a warning from getting too near. Though the woman didn’t appear scared, she crept backward so she was a safe distance away.

“My name is Aynar,” she said. “My son is the healer for our people. But he’s back at camp, so I’m the best we have for now. Your wound will not heal on its own. Rot can easily set into mountain lion bites. If you allow me, I would tend the wound on your neck, Abeke of Okaihee.”

Abeke startled. “You know my name!”

“I wasn’t sure until you said Rollan’s name,” the woman said, giving Abeke an apologetic smile. “I hope you will forgive the spears pointed in your direction. Word has reached us that Erdas has again entered a troubled time. Greetings, too, Rollan of Concorba. You are both legends here. We suspected who you were immediately—it’s not every day, after all, that one comes across a leopard prowling here.”

“No autographs, please,” Rollan said wryly.

“You should move as little as possible,” Aynar continued to Abeke. “Our horses are on the other side of this grove. With your blessing, we’ll fetch them and rig a litter to carry you to our camp. It’s only a few miles off.”

Rollan knelt beside the woman, taking in Abeke’s injury and giving her a worried smile. His expression was enough to tell Abeke he was willing to go along with Aynar’s plan.

“Thank you for helping us,” Abeke said.

Aynar nodded and started giving orders in the tribal language. Once the

hunters were out of view, Rollan plopped down beside Abeke. “Huh. Not two days into our Amayan journey and we already need rescuing.”

“Sorry,” Abeke said, gingerly prodding the wound on her neck. “It’s not like I *meant* for that mountain lion to maul me.”

At the mention of Abeke’s attacker, Uraza gave an angry growl. Abeke affectionately tousled the fluff of hair sticking up on the back of Uraza’s neck, and the leopard relaxed.

“What we need most is information,” Rollan said. “Maybe this tribe knows about the summoned Great Beast. When you think about it, your injury might have been a brilliant move.”

“Hard to see it that way at the moment,” Abeke said, wincing.

The tribespeople returned with a litter rigged behind one of their horses. They’d taken a birch canoe, tied one end to the saddle, and attached two wooden discs to the low end so that it could roll. “Come,” Aynar said to Abeke. “Lie inside.”

The world bloomed white as Rollan helped Abeke to her feet, but her friend’s arm under her shoulders was strong and firm as he got her to the litter and gently arranged her inside. Aynar removed the blood-soaked fabric binding Abeke’s neck and used a flat, smooth stick to apply a poultice that stung at first but soon suffused Abeke with a cool, fresh feeling. Aynar lightly draped a soft rabbit’s hide over the wound.

Now that her pain had lessened, all Abeke wanted was to fall asleep. With the last of her energy, she called Uraza into passive state for the journey. Though the leopard was swift, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with horses over a long distance. Abeke sleepily watched Rollan mount Aynar’s steed behind her, and then passed out. Even though the litter bumped and dragged, she didn’t wake up until they came to a stop.



That poultice must have had something powerful in it; when she opened her eyes, Abeke felt like herself again. She untied the rawhide strands attaching her to the litter and rolled over the side, easily getting to her feet. She could hear no one around: They must have decided to let her sleep late into the day.

The tribe’s camp was a scattering of large tents, each crafted from slender logs with animal hide stretched over. The grass around each tent was fresh

and untrampled, which made Abeke think they hadn't been set up for long. Maybe the tribe moved every day, or every couple of days. The nomad tribes in the north of Nilo were much the same. They avoided a lot of the problems that plagued those who lived in villages—lice, parasites, scavengers—by bedding somewhere new every night.

The sky was so large up here. When Abeke squinted her eyes, it was almost like she was below the same wide blue sky that stretched above Okaihee. Just seeing its expansiveness invigorated her. She hoped that after she and Rollan had tracked down this Great Beast, Lenori would augur the next one in Nilo. Abeke longed to see her father and sister again.

“I see you're feeling better,” came a quiet voice. Abeke turned to see a boy of about eleven emerge from the smallest tent. His skin was dark, nearly as dark as Abeke's, though his cheeks were a pink red, almost the color of salmon. His hair was tied back in a single braid that went down his back, and his eyes were a startling color—light orange-brown, like the rind of a cheese.

“You're Aynar's son, the tribe's healer,” Abeke said. Something about the gentleness in the boy's eyes had made it clear.

“I am,” he said, with an uneasy tilt to his head.

“Forgive me,” Abeke said, “but aren't you a little young for that responsibility?”

“You were not that much older than me when you went to fight with the Greencloaks,” the boy said, smiling. “But you are correct. I was named healer only recently. There were special circumstances. In any case, our word for 'healer' has a much broader set of meanings than it does in the Common language.”

“It does?”

At Abeke's interest, the boy's previous shyness melted away. “Our healers are also moral guides. We conduct listening ceremonies to help our people find their hearts. The other boys hunt, but that doesn't interest me much at all.”

Abeke experimented with her neck, angling her head from side to side. Miraculously, she was able to do so without pain. The clean scent of pine rose from her fresh bandages. “I'm glad it doesn't,” Abeke said. “You have real talent—what's your name?”

The boy beamed with pride. “Anda. My mother gave you a poultice I

made. I always send the hunters out with it, and it appears to have done its work. While you were sleeping, I added another. This new one should speed the healing even more, and prevent scarring.”

“Where is Rollan?” Abeke asked.

“Hunting with the men. They would have loved for you to join them—it’s a rare opportunity to learn from such a famous hunter—but you were asleep. So Rollan went instead. He ... did not seem comfortable riding. I’ve never seen a horse take such an instant disliking to someone.”

“He has that effect on horses,” Abeke said with a smile. “And walruses. And some people. Is there anything to eat?”

“Of course,” Anda said, blushing. “I should have offered earlier.”

Abeke chewed strips of salty yak jerky while Anda walked her around the camp. It was small—only five large tents circling a fire. Two horses, so scrawny they were probably used for carrying supplies and not riders, grazed nearby.

After warning Anda, Abeke summoned Uraza. The leopard nuzzled Abeke affectionately, then sniffed worriedly at her wounded neck. She was clearly relieved by what she found. Uraza bounded and pranced, undoubtedly hunting for more butterflies—until she noticed Anda.

Uraza stood stock-still, staring at the boy with her large lavender eyes. Then she did something Abeke had never seen Uraza do before: The leopard lay down in the earth, head resting on her paws, and stared up at him.

“She likes you,” Abeke said. But her voice trailed off, because she could see that it was more than that. The expression in Uraza’s eyes was closer to submission.

“Should we show her?” Anda asked the open air. Abeke whirled around, but couldn’t see what or who Anda was talking to.

Uraza purred loudly, at full attention as she stared into the nearby tree line.

Abeke followed the leopard’s gaze and saw, camouflaged in a copse of pine trees, an elk.

A very large elk. It stood motionless, noble head held high, antlers as broad as a man’s arms. Its fur was tinged with white and gold, the same mix of colors as Anda’s striking eyes.

The elk’s eyes locked on Anda, then it stepped out toward them, its gait

stately and unhurried.

“You summoned Tellun,” Abeke said in awe.

“You make him sound so serious.” Anda laughed. “I just think of him as my elk. And I’m his boy.”

As the noble elk drew near, there was no shred of doubt in Abeke’s mind that she was in the presence of Tellun, the leader of all the Great Beasts. Uraza looked at him with wide, awestruck eyes, confirming Abeke’s thoughts.

Without quite knowing why, Abeke got to her knees.

“Please get up! There’s no need to do that!” Anda said. “My elk is silly most of the time; I’m not sure why he’s being so serious today ...” Anda’s voice trailed off, and his lips moved silently instead. It looked like he was communicating with the elk. Anda’s light brown eyes widened, and his jaw set tight.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you were *that* important?” he asked.



When the hunters returned, Abeke, Anda, Uraza, and Tellun himself were quietly waiting at the edge of the camp. They watched the dust cloud gradually settle as the hunters brought their horses to a halt.

“Abeke!” Rollan said as he struggled to dismount from his horse, then struggled even harder to extract his foot from the stirrup. “I wish you had been with us. Apparently I’ve already lost all my saddle callouses—ouch—but I used a *bow*! And I wasn’t half bad. I mean I wasn’t Abeke-level or anything, but ...”

Rollan’s eyes widened, and he went pale. Just like Abeke, he, too, dropped to his knees when he realized he was in the presence of Tellun.

The noble elk maintained his serene gaze, but Abeke suspected she saw a wink in his eyes.

Aynar dismounted and approached, arm in arm with a tall, severe-looking man. He had his hair in a long braid, like Anda’s, but his was striped with gray. If his face had ever had any of Anda’s gentleness, it had lost it long ago. Abeke sensed she was seeing the boy’s father.

“I see our guests have met Tellun,” Aynar said. Beside her, Anda’s father watched the elk warily.

“The Great Beasts have returned to Erdas,” Abeke said. “Your son has

had a tremendous honor come to him.”

“The type of honor that also destroys all of our tribe’s privacy,” Anda’s father muttered.

Abeke frowned. She remembered her own bonding ceremony, when she’d summoned Uraza—the leopard had brought a deluge of life-giving rain to her parched village. At the time, Abeke had thought she’d become her village’s new Rain Dancer. Her father had responded to that news with surprising skepticism. Though she and her family had worked through their differences, Abeke watched a similar defensiveness settle into Anda’s father’s features. Because of what she’d been through with her own family, though, she understood it: He wanted to believe all of this was impossible, so the tribe’s life could remain the way it had always been.

While the other hunters dismounted, silent with reverence, Aynar inspected Abeke’s wound. “I never would have thought that you’d be standing, much less walking around, by the time we came back. Anda, your skills have improved so much, my son.”

Abeke ran a hand over the bandage on the back of her neck. “I can barely feel any pain. It’s amazing. I hope Anda gets to meet Jhi someday. They could learn a lot from each other.”

“They could gossip in the women’s tent and sip herbal teas together,” Anda’s father said.

Rollan cut him a severe look. “A talented healer can turn the tide of a military campaign far more effectively than even the strongest warrior. I’ve seen it happen.”

Anda’s father shook his head curtly and tightened the strap of his quiver with a savage jerk. “Do not pretend to educate me on battle. You should know your place—maybe children rule in Greenhaven, but not here.”

“There are more important concerns for us to talk about,” Abeke said, stepping between the two. “A man named Zerif is on the loose, hunting down the Great Beasts as they return to the world.” She cast a worried look at Anda. “Severing them from their human partners.”

“I knew we should not trust these outsiders,” said Anda’s gruff father. “Don’t you see, Aynar—they have come to take our son away.”

Aynar looked deep into Anda’s eyes. “Is that true? You will have to leave?”

Anda couldn't meet his mother's gaze. "It won't be safe for any of us if I stay here. Abeke tells me that Zerif is very powerful, and getting stronger with every Great Beast he claims."

"I'm sorry, Aynar," Abeke said. "I know that your tribe named Anda as its healer precisely because of the good omen when he summoned Tellun. I, too, left my family after I summoned Uraza. I know how painful this is, but believe me when I tell you that I'm closer to my family now than I ever was before I left Okaihee. I've learned so much about myself, and them, while I was away. Anda will return to you even more talented—and even wiser."

"Zerif is undoubtedly on his way," Rollan said. "Even with the help of Uraza and Essix and all your hunters, we'd be stupid to fight him. Your son's best hope—and the best hope for Erdas—is for him to come with us to Greenhaven."

Aynar's eyes filled with tears as she looked at her son. "You've made up your mind. I can see it."

Anda grimaced. "The whole tribe is in danger while Tellun and I stay."

Aynar let out a long sigh and took a step backward. She gathered herself, love and anguish beaming from her eyes as she fought to hold herself together. "I only ask two things of you, my precious son: Do everything you can to keep yourself safe, and return to us once you are able. I'll think of you every time the first star comes out at night."

"And I'll think of you, Mother," Anda said, tears streaming down his face.

At the sight of his son's crying, Anda's father's face tightened into a frown. But he stepped to Anda and clasped him to his chest. "Please don't forget our people's ways when you're on the outside. You will always have a place in our tribe."

"I won't, Father," Anda said. "I'll make you and the rest of the village proud."

"Keep working on your spear arm," his father said.

Anda nodded, struggling to meet his father's eyes.

"Come, let's go," Abeke said sorrowfully. "We have no way of knowing when Zerif will close in."

As Anda shuffled over to join them, Rollan threw his arm around Anda's shoulders. "Wait until you see the healing poultices the Greencloaks have come up with," he whispered. "You're going to be amazed. You can spend

your time in Greenhaven practicing whatever you want.”

With one bound, Tellun was at Anda’s side. Abeke watched in astonishment as the leader of the Great Beasts gave Anda an affectionate lick along the side of his face. He then pressed his side against Anda’s, as if to shoulder some of the boy’s weight.



PHOS ASTOS

CONOR AND HIS COMPANIONS MOVED SWIFTLY THROUGH winding stone tunnels. The type of rock varied as they traveled—sometimes they were surrounded by speckled granite, sometimes soft, pockmarked limestone, sometimes slippery obsidian. Their footfalls—and the footfalls of other unknown creatures creeping in the dark—reverberated through the tight spaces.

Without the noise of the world above to fill the air, the quiet music of the earth sighed in Conor's ears. The creaking of rock was constant, but there were also rivulets of water trickling somewhere deep inside the stone, beneath the muttering breezes of damp, cool air.

Conor kept his torch lit, but somehow Xanthe was able to see clearly even when she scouted ahead of its light. She'd call out directions to them from much farther along. By the time the companions managed to reach her, Conor would be amazed to see that Xanthe had already clambered up slick passageways and scaled cave walls in the darkness.

Whenever Xanthe pulled far ahead, she sang an ethereal, tuneless song so the others could locate her. The song grew louder and louder until eventually Conor would turn a corner and find the pale girl waiting, perched on a rock or a giant toadstool, her head cocked at a quizzical angle. Then she'd wordlessly continue on her way.

Seen from behind, Xanthe looked even more like the strange beings that had attacked them—the ones she'd called the Many. In Conor's spooked imaginings, her short white hair resembled their bald heads, and her narrow frame was ghastly instead of elegant. But then whenever she'd turn to face

them, he'd see the goodwill in her eyes as she beckoned them forward.

"You're all doing very well," Xanthe said cheerfully as she led them splashing through an underground stream. "Before the trouble with the Wyrms, we sent occasional patrols upside to scout. They always came back telling stories of how oafish the upsiders were. You three—well, you're not at the level of Sadreans, but you're still good climbers."

"Thank you?" Meilin said dryly as she heaved herself over a boulder, landing in a few inches of slimy water.

To Conor's surprise, Meilin allowed Xanthe to help her to her feet. "We're almost halfway there now," Xanthe said. "We'll be at Phos Astos before too long."

"What's Phos Astos?" Takoda asked.

"That is a joke, right?" Xanthe called over her shoulder.

"Um, no," Takoda said.

Xanthe stopped short in the tunnel, and the other three nearly piled into her. "Are you telling me you know that little about this land? We have guarded Erdas for centuries."

It did sound pretty bad when she put it that way.

Conor looked to Meilin. If any of them would have been taught about this place, it was her. But even she reluctantly nodded her head.

Xanthe shook her head when she saw their bewildered reactions. "There used to be many of us, but the last few months ..." She trailed off. "Let me start closer to the beginning. Phos Astos is one of many underground cities settled by my people. These tunnels pass under Erdas, all the way to its farthest corners. Our cities are connected by paths carved out over millennia by ancient rivers and the roots of the Evertree, and we once traded resources along those routes. Until recently." She let out a long sigh. "The Many are *our people*, twisted by an infection that turns into something more like ... occupation once it reaches their foreheads."

Unable to stifle a gasp, Conor put a hand to his sleeve. The gray creature had been just past his elbow the last time he'd checked. Once it finished its climb, would he end up like one of those monsters?

"We've lost all contact with the other cities of Sadre," Xanthe said. She swallowed, and when she spoke again her voice shook. "Our fear is that they've all succumbed to the infection. Phos Astos might be the last remnant

of our civilization.”

Meilin fell back a step so that, out of Xanthe’s view, she could squeeze Conor’s hand. Her message was double: *It’s going to be okay* and *Don’t say anything*.

“Oh!” Xanthe said as she sighted something in the distance. “We’re nearly there. Now’s when we stop going forward and start going down.”

“Down?” Conor asked, stomach tightening.

“Down?” Takoda repeated.

“Yes, down,” Xanthe said, breaking into a sudden sprint. “Like this!”

She glided forward into the darkness, her white skin and hair shining long after her black shift had merged into the surrounding gloom. Then, in an instant, she dropped away. She simply disappeared.

“Um, can anyone tell me what just happened?” Takoda asked.

“I don’t know,” Meilin said, creeping forward. “Xanthe? Are you there?”

Torch brandished, Conor took the lead as they eased toward the spot where Xanthe had disappeared. “Oh, wow,” he breathed.

Warm air rushed upward in front of him, like in a chimney. They were at the brink of a chasm, glossy black stone extending down as far as the torchlight went. Conor closed his eyes and smiled; the rising air smelled vaguely like the hot stones his mother had once used to warm his bed when he’d come back from shepherding during the brutal Euran winters.

“She just jumped?” Takoda asked. “Into this stream of air?”

“Maybe ...” Meilin said, finger tapping her lips as she puzzled it out. “My tutors taught me about air currents. If the upward draft can compensate for a body’s downward acceleration due to grav—”

Meilin broke off, dumbfounded, as Takoda pivoted so his back was to the chasm, cheerfully waved good-bye, and let himself fall backward. He was there, and then he was gone, as simple as that.

Conor and Meilin stared at each other, beyond words.

Takoda’s voice rose up through the hum of the updraft. “Guys, this is *amazing!*”

“We’ve all gone crazy,” Meilin said. “Maybe there’s some gas in the air that’s making us all—”

Conor stepped off the edge. “Bye, Meilin!” he called up against the hot wind.

At first he fell rapidly, but the moment he let his arms out wide, the updraft caught him and it was like he was barely falling at all. His torch winked out, leaving him in darkness as he gently descended.

“I can’t believe you just did that. I’ll kill you once I catch up!” Meilin shouted down.

Conor smiled as he imagined her outraged expression. As he continued to descend, he made out Takoda’s voice: “Conor, is that you? You’re about to hit a net. Xanthe and I will get you out.”

Conor rolled over so he was looking down. The dark air wavered in the heat, but very far below, like at the waking edge of a dream, he saw a muted glow. The horizon was a soft, gauzy pink.

Clearly Conor’s floating was about to end, but he wished it wouldn’t. He hadn’t realized how oppressive the squat tunnels of Sadre had been until they’d opened up. There was so much space around him now, and so much clean air—he never wanted to go back to that claustrophobia.

“Okay, see him?” Xanthe said somewhere in the darkness.

Black lines began to trace themselves over the glow from below. They grew bigger and bigger until Conor was caught in some sort of net, a lattice of the same woven material as Xanthe’s shift. As soon as he hit it, slender hands reached from the side to grasp him, and then before he knew it Xanthe and Takoda had pulled him off.

They were seated on the far edge of the net. The open spaces between the mushroomy rope led to the ground far below, but the net was sturdy enough that he didn’t feel afraid.

“Isn’t this amazing, Conor?” Takoda asked. “To think we’re the only people from the surface to have ever seen this place!”

In his excitement, Takoda lost his balance. The rope netting pouched beneath his feet, sending him sliding into Xanthe. Both muttered flustered apologies, and Conor noted with amusement how extra vivid Xanthe’s blush was against her pale skin.

As the two carefully extracted themselves, Conor looked down through the netting. Now that the updraft wasn’t marbling the air, he could see more of the vista below.

They were suspended at the top of a glittering cavern, the ground at least a hundred feet below. The soft pink glow was from mushrooms—many, many

mushrooms. The tallest soared as high as Euran oldwood trees and were ringed by shorter mushrooms, which were ringed by even shorter, until the ground at the edge was dusted with a fringe of fungus. All of them gave off the same dull pink light that illuminated the people walking below. The sheer majesty of the cavern was enough to take Conor's breath away.

"Xanthe," he breathed. "This is Phos Astos?"

Xanthe gave him a sly smile by way of an answer, then sat up on the net, expertly swinging her body so that she bounced along with her hands gripping the edge. Heedless of the hundred-foot drop, she leaned far over the side. Seeing her close to tumbling into the wide open space, Conor reeled with vertigo. There was so little separating him from the air below—just these slim black filaments.

"It's perfectly safe," Xanthe said, watching his expression. "There's another net below this one. Just watch me, and then do what I do. Ready? One —" She was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Conor?" called Meilin. Conor turned in time to see her float down the stream of hot air. She face-planted into the net, then turned to glare at them furiously.

"Hey, Meilin," Conor called. "Hold on, we'll come bring you over."

"Stay where you are," she called warningly. "I'll come to you." Meilin looked down and shrieked when she saw the open space beneath her. She began to creep along the netting, nervously testing her weight on each section of the net before proceeding. Once she'd reached her friends, she closed her eyes and held her knees tight to her chest, keeping herself as compact as possible. "How do we get down?" she asked in a small voice.

"Are you scared of heights, Meilin?" Conor asked. At first his tone was mischievous, but became serious as he realized how scared she was.

"I just want to be on the ground," she said, not opening her eyes.

"We'll be on solid ground in a moment," Xanthe said, smiling encouragingly. "Let me warn my people that you'll be arriving."

Putting her delicate fingers to her mouth, Xanthe let out a high-pitched whistle.

To Conor's surprise, more people began to emerge from the mushrooms themselves, revealing wide openings in the trunks that towered over the cave floor like great trees.

Their skin was the same luminous white as Xanthe's, and they all had short hair of the palest blond. They held still at the entrances, staring up at Conor and the others with startled pink eyes. There were hundreds of them already, and more were emerging every second. Men and women, children and elderly, tall and short—all looked up in wonder.

“Don't be afraid!” Xanthe called down. “These people have come from the surface! They're friends!”

Shocked whispers went through the crowd, then more and more of the Sadreans emerged from their mushroom homes. “Tayne,” Xanthe yelled to the nearest, a small, pale boy peering out an opening at the top of the tallest mushroom, “go tell the elders! We're coming down.”

The boy waved at Xanthe, then nodded and called something in an unknown language. He then clambered ably down rungs that had been carved into the mushroom flesh. Wherever he placed his hands, he blocked some of the mushroom's pink glow, sending flickering patterns of light onto the cavern's obsidian walls.

Xanthe smiled at the companions' awestruck expressions, obviously pleased by the effect Phos Astos was having on them. “Take it all in,” she said. “You won't get a better view of it than from way up above.”

Pink was the city's dominant color, but as Conor's eyes adjusted he saw that there were greens and yellows, too. The mushrooms had some other colorful fungus growing upon them, so that great swaths of glittering color spread all the way up the largest bulbs. The overall effect was that the air shimmered everywhere Conor looked, like he was peering through a fly's wings.

In the center of the city was an open hole leading into the earth, from which the warm air rose up to pass through the ceiling of the cavern. *It must warm the whole city*, Conor realized. It was certainly a welcome change after the chill of the tunnels.

More and more of the Sadreans emerged from hiding. As they did, they looked up at the newcomers and froze, astonishment slackening their faces. Conor heard gasps echo throughout the cavern. After letting her people gawk at them for a minute, Xanthe whistled and called out something in her language, waving them along. They didn't budge, though.

Conor felt his face flush as the dozens of Sadreans staring up became

hundreds and then thousands. Right in front of his eyes a dignified woman holding the hands of two children fell to the ground and broke into sobs of joy. A large bat hung from a fold of the woman's shift—it seemed some Sadreans had spirit animals, too.

Down at the base of a mushroom tree, a Sadrean woman stood before a pen in which a number of fuzzy white spiders were crawling over themselves to eat the teeming beetles the woman poured from a bucket. She held it slackly as she stared in wonder at the outsiders, the insects flooding the floor of the pen.

Spiders as livestock. Conor shuddered.

Meilin opened her eyes, and seemed to be just as stunned by the sight of all these people paused in the middle of their everyday lives miles under the earth, staring up at *them*; her mouth hung slack and her hand curled around Conor's elbow in awe.

"*Phos Astos* means 'the city of light,'" Xanthe said, surveying her home as she gripped the netting. "Sadre has always protected Erdas from the Wyrms. We were the guardians you didn't even know you had. Now I fear this city is all that remains of us."

Takoda kept his face emotionless, but he cocked his head at Xanthe. "I'm sorry."

She laughed quietly, a light, silvery sound that ended sooner than Conor expected. "It isn't your fault."

"Does your family live in one of those homes carved out of the mushrooms?" Meilin asked.

"Yes," Xanthe said, her eyes going proudly to one of the smaller mushrooms on the city's edge. "In that one there. I will look forward to introducing you to them. But first you should meet the elders. Now that they know you're here, they'll assemble at our *teilidh*—our mural chamber. Come, follow me."

Without further preamble, Xanthe swung around the edge of the net and let go, dropping twenty feet or so until she hit the next one down. She let the rebound pitch her off the edge and drop her to the last net. Patting her hair flat in the pink light of the glowing city, she gracefully stepped off onto *Phos Astos*'s stone floor.

Takoda was the first to the edge of their net, placing his hands in the same

position Xanthe had. “How are you so comfortable with all this?” Conor asked.

“Cliff diving is a very popular hobby in Southern Nilo,” Takoda said with a wink, before swan diving to the net below. He folded into a cannonball at the last moment and took a gigantic bounce to the next net down, hooting in glee the whole time. An admiring cheer rose from the watching Sadreans.

“Our man of mystery,” Meilin said in amazement as she watched Takoda stride forward and introduce himself to the nearby Sadreans. “Shy with us and assertive with everyone else.”

Conor held out his hand. “Here. Since you’re scared of heights, do you want to go together?”

Meilin nodded, biting her lip, and gratefully took Conor’s hand. “We’ll wait until you’re ready,” Conor said.

She peered over the edge. “I—I don’t know if I can do this, Conor,” she stammered.

“Of course you can,” he said, kneeling beside her on the swaying net. “Just—”

“Ha!” Meilin yelled, then with one expert movement pushed Conor over. He fell twenty feet, screaming his head off, belly flopping onto the net below. He lay still, hands over his face while he listened to the giggles of a few thousand watching Sadreans.

The net surged as Meilin landed beside him, chuckling. “I’m not afraid of heights, you dummy,” she said.

“Are you pleased with yourself?” Conor asked, shaking his head.

“Yes, very,” she said.

Reaching over, Conor slowly and deliberately placed a hand on Meilin’s back and unceremoniously heaved her off the net.

By the time they’d stepped onto the city’s rock floor, Conor and Meilin were breathless with laughter. That stopped quickly, though, once they saw that the assembled residents of Phos Astos were still staring at them.

“Come,” Xanthe said as she began to weave a passage through the mushroom buildings. “The elders will be waiting.”

When the Sadreans didn’t move out of the way, she made a clicking noise in her throat and waved her hand to shoo them away. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It must make you uncomfortable to have them ogling you like this.”

Even though most of the Sadreans reluctantly returned to their business, as he hesitantly started forward Conor caught the eyes of no fewer than a dozen who were still staring at him. When they saw him looking back, the Sadreans startled and turned to other tasks, pretending they hadn't been gaping. Conor watched them with interest as he passed. Some were sharpening spears made from resin, or swords fashioned from crystals. Others were slivering a large black mushroom, separating wafer-thin layers that another Sadrean was sewing into patchwork cloth. Entranced, Conor realized with a start that his friends were already a dozen paces ahead.

"The reason Phos Astos has been able to hold out against the Many for this long," Xanthe was explaining to Meilin as Conor caught up, "is that our city is surrounded by a plain of flat glacier stone that extends half a mile wide and is as smooth as a mushroom. Once, a black river passed over it, and we had to raft across to reach this cavern. But now we've discovered how to dam the river and walk across the dry riverbed. The Many may be powerful, but when they become infected, they lose their memory and their reason. When they attack, they surge across the plain without any caution, filling it like the black river once did."

They lose their memory and their reason. The words rattled around Conor's head.

"And that's when you release the dam!" Meilin said.

Xanthe shrugged humbly. "It has worked in the past. But it's not a perfect system. The pressure of the water is strong enough that it takes us days to muscle the mechanisms back into place and drain the trap, leaving us vulnerable in the meantime. And we only have one shot—we have to time the flooding perfectly when the Many are all on the plain itself. If we miss any, then they can still get across after the initial flood sweeps the others away."

"Still," Meilin said, shaking her head in admiration and stepping around a Sadrean child with his thumb in his mouth, staring up at her in awe. "It's a stroke of genius. I'm impressed."

"Thank you," Xanthe said, clearly pleased with herself.

The tunnel sloped downward, and to continue along it they had to turn sideways, pressing the edges of their boots sharply into the rock. Xanthe kept cutting backward glances, obviously still fascinated by the outsiders. In one of her distracted moments, she tumbled—and it was Takoda who caught her. He

flashed out one hand and ably grabbed hold of her shoulder, righting her without losing his own balance. Xanthe smiled shyly and thanked him.

As he walked, Conor turned Xanthe's words over in his mind. Maybe the Many weren't as mindless as everyone was assuming—which meant they were more dangerous than anyone thought.

"Careful, now," Xanthe said. "We're approaching the dam's mechanism."

The slate all around them began to shine as Conor's torch streaked light along its surface. The tunnel sloped down before giving out onto a black plain. They were at a ledge ten feet or so above it, at the top of the dam. The mechanism to open it was simple: Thick bands of corded rope were wrapped around two great wheels of iron, with handles evenly spaced along each.

"These wheels connect to a large door damming the river upstream," Xanthe said. "By turning them, we can control the amount of water flowing out."

"And wash out the Many," Conor said.

"Underground locks must have been difficult to build," Meilin said approvingly.

Xanthe held her finger up to her lips to quiet them, then paused, her head tilted in the air. Then she shook her head. "I thought I heard something," she said. "But it's nothing."

She knelt at the ledge's lip. A small mushroom was growing there, gold in color and shaped like a bell. And, like a bell, it rang out when Xanthe flicked it. "These are what we call screamers," she said proudly. "We've cultivated them over the centuries as a warning system. If the Many approach us, they'll have to cross through tracts of these. The mushrooms set off a chain reaction all the way into Phos Astos, ringing so loudly that they wake everyone up. Come, this way."

Xanthe made a quick turn, disappearing into an opening in the slate wall. Remembering the tight tunnels they'd been in when the jabbering horde had attacked, Conor quailed. But after watching Meilin and Takoda calmly enter the passageway, he followed, too.

The glowing pink-and-green dust was back, coating the walkway. Conor watched, transfixed, as it swirled around the ankles of his companions, whose paces left foot-sized patches of clear slate behind them.

"You're really in for a treat," Xanthe said. "I love these murals."

“Shouldn’t someone be keeping an eye on the riverbed?” Conor asked. “Just to be safe?”

“The screamers won’t fail,” the girl replied surely. “And the elders are waiting for us in the mural chamber. They’re going to be so excited to meet you.”

They stepped into a cavern, only a dozen feet across but so tall that Conor couldn’t see its roof. Mushrooms grew up and down the walls, a soft carpet of glowing plants. It all served as illumination for the masterpiece in the room’s center.

A massive stalagmite had built up there, extending halfway up the vaulting room. Carvings were chipped into its surface, images winding around and up the thick structure. The first looked like a snake swimming in an ocean of stars. Conor leaned forward to examine it, only then noticing that there were people quietly assembled around the far side.

Conor eased around to see a half dozen Sadrean men and women standing around the stalagmite in a perfect semicircle, clad in voluminous robes made from the same shimmering black cloth as Xanthe’s shift. They’d been talking to one another in hushed voices, but jolted to attention at the new arrivals.

“Here are the upsiders!” Xanthe exclaimed to them. “Conor, Meilin, and Takoda, these are the elders of Phos Astos.”

As one, the elders stared at them with something like awe on their faces. Conor flushed with embarrassment.

“Thanks be to you,” said one elderly woman, her joints creaking as she got down to one knee, tears in her eyes. “Our saviors have finally come.”

A second elder dropped to his knees, tears streaming down his wrinkled face.

The companions stared at one another. “No, please, no one else get on their knees,” Conor said.

The tallest elder stepped toward them. He was a handsome, severe-looking man with a patch over one eye. “My name is Ingailor. Takoda, Conor, and Meilin, please know how honored we are that you have come. This moment has been prophesied for a long time. You’ve been called to us to defeat the Wyrms.”

“I’m sorry,” Takoda said. “But could someone tell me what this Wyrms is that everyone keeps talking about?”

All the elders went perfectly still. The old woman who had been kneeling staggered to her feet, confusion slackening her face.

Ingailor shook his head. “I don’t understand. Do you have another name for the Wyrms up on the surface?”

“Maybe,” Takoda said. “I don’t know.” He looked to Meilin. *Can you give me some help here?*

She shook her head.

Xanthe grabbed Conor’s shoulder. When he turned toward her, he was startled to see hope in her eyes that was so desperate it looked almost like panic. “What about the weapon?” she asked.

Conor met her wide eyes. “I’m sorry, Xanthe. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

One of the elders gave an anguished cry and dropped to the ground.

Ingailor kept his face impassive. “If you don’t have the weapon, why have you come here?”

“The Evertree is sick,” Conor explained. “And the source of its illness is coming from below.”

Xanthe stepped in front of the companions, and addressed the elders. “I’m sorry! They know nothing of us,” she said. “But fate must have brought them here to save us from the Many. It’s too much of a coincidence not to be ordained.”

Ingailor raised a hand to stop Xanthe from speaking further, the expression on his face both tough and oddly gentle. The rest of the elders weren’t as good at hiding their feelings—they were clearly aghast. “I don’t doubt that you believe this. But I’m not sure what these children can do that we haven’t already tried. And without the weapon ...”

“I understand that you must be disappointed,” Xanthe said, keeping her eyes downcast. “But perhaps if we show them the story in the murals, they might still see something in them that we haven’t.”

Ingailor smiled wanly. In that moment, Conor realized that he was only being brave for his people—he had given up all hope. “That’s a good plan. You do your family proud. And we have nothing to lose.” He turned to the rest of the assembled elders. “*Belsharth roha.*”

“*Belsharth rohi,*” they said back, nodding. Then, as one, they parted and shuffled gloomily out of the cavern.

As Ingailor stepped to one of the carvings, Xanthe stayed close to his side. Conor heard her whisper: “Trust my intuition in this. All hope is not lost, Elder Ingailor.”

Ingailor didn’t react, and instead pointed to the image carved in the wall above him. It was of a dozen men and women in a primitive boat crossing a choppy sea, their rows of oars dipping into the water.

“This shows the founding of Erdas,” he explained. “The bands of hunters that came together to become the civilization known as the Hellans.”

Meilin’s eyes widened in surprise. “I’ve read about the Hellans,” she said. “They were some of the earliest astronomers. Many of their constellations are still used in navigation today.”

It was Xanthe who pointed to the next carved image, a giant tree surrounded by the shapes of fifteen animals—each icon representing one of the Great Beasts. Conor was pleased to see that Briggan and Jhi and Uraza were pictured near one another, friends even way back then. That was only half the image, however: The tree’s roots extended down deep, wrapping around what looked like an egg, which the artist had crusted with the dust of sapphires and emeralds. It looked like the tree was cradling the egg in the lattice of its roots—or caging it.

“This is the essential conflict of Erdas and Sadre,” Xanthe said. “The Evertree versus the Wyrms. The tree provides life. It bonds animals and humans as allies. The Wyrms is ... something else. We suspect it may be as old as the Evertree itself. It has always slept deep in the earth, contained within its roots.”

“The Wyrms is a parasite,” Ingailor said with sudden vehemence, touching his fingers to the egg in the carving. “It is chaos and hunger incarnate. For a millennium it has slept, encased in an egg kept dormant by the power of the Evertree. But it was a restless sleep.”

“How do you know all this?” Meilin asked. “The Evertree was hidden from humans until very recently.”

“The wisest of the Great Beasts sought out the Hellans,” Ingailor said, pulling his hand away from the jeweled egg. “Though the Great Beasts came from the Evertree, only *he* sensed the rot that lurked beneath it. He told the Hellans about the danger of the Wyrms and gave us our task: By making sure the Evertree’s roots were healthy and strong, we could help delay the eventual

coming of the Wyrms. The Hellans above were tasked with building a weapon, something capable of stopping the Wyrms if it ever broke free.”

Conor’s heart sank. Just a small piece of a single parasite was slowly taking his body from him. Without the weapon, what chance did they have against the Wyrms and all of its minions?

Meilin stood close to Conor, tension radiating from her.

They moved to the next panel. There, Hellans hugged good-bye, tears on their faces, as half of them climbed down into a cave. “The Hellans divided into two people,” said Xanthe. “Our brothers and sisters stayed above. We, the Sadreans, went below to tend to the Evertree’s roots. That was the last time we ever lived on the surface.”

“Not too long ago,” Ingailor continued, “the Evertree’s roots withered, and the Wyrms’ egg dropped. Then, just as mysteriously, new roots began to grow where the old had been. They cradled the egg again, but they were young yet, and much weaker than before. The Wyrms sensed that weakness. It is waking. Worse still, the fall cracked the egg, allowing small gray parasites, extensions of the Wyrms’ will, to spill out. They have spread all through Sadre, sowing chaos and possessing our people.”

“The Many,” Conor said, goose bumps breaking out along his arms. Maybe it was only his imagination, but he thought he could sense his own parasite twitching.

“This also explains why the Evertree is sick,” Takoda said.

“Worse than sick,” said Xanthe. “Dying! As the Wyrms wakes, it consumes the tree for its power.”

“The parasites are on the surface, too,” Conor said, fingers clenched on his arm. “A man named Zerif is using them to possess the Great Beasts—and people. Maybe we can seal the egg somehow.” Even if it was too late for him, he could possibly help to save others from the infection that was claiming him. “Can you lead us there?”

“The path to the Wyrms’ egg is crawling with the Many. Any who attempted that journey would not return.” Ingailor frowned wearily. “I’m sorry, but Phos Astos needs its elders now more than ever. I must stay here.”

“But I am in my wander years,” Xanthe said. “I’ve been to the Evertree’s roots before. That was before the Many began their assault, but I know the way. Let me be the one who brings the upsiders to the Wyrms.”

“Before you go offering yourself up for risks like that,” Meilin said, “you should know that we don’t even have a plan for what we’ll do about the Wyrms once we get there. The Hellan civilization is ancient history. If they had a weapon, it most likely disappeared with them.”

Xanthe clenched her fists and raised her head, a new resolve in her expression. “I had hoped that you might be the Hellans. I let myself believe you had brought us their weapon, and I know now that I was wrong. But I won’t let go of my belief that you’ll save us. That *will* happen.”

“Xanthe’s right. It won’t help any of us to give up hope—” Takoda started, but froze.

A shrill, thunderous ringing filled the chamber. The sound was powerful enough to shake multicolored motes down from the walls, bathing the air in color.

Xanthe and Ingailor were instantly in motion, sprinting out of the cavern. “The screamers!” Xanthe called over her shoulder. “The Many are attacking!”

As they sped down the tunnel leading back to the plain, the mushroom dust swirled up in great gusts, clouding Conor’s vision and making him cough. He covered his mouth with his sleeve as they dashed down the sloping tunnel.

The companions skidded to a stop just shy of the ledge at the tunnel’s exit. They were only ten feet or so above the smooth slate plain, two wheels and a lock the only things guarding them—and Phos Astos—from annihilation.

Xanthe lay her hand over the screamer’s bulby head until it stilled, then she and Ingailor hunched over one of the wheels, talking heatedly in their language.

“When’s the last time you used this thing?” Conor asked.

Ingailor spared one glance at Conor before returning to examining the wheel. “We’ve never had a second attack come this soon—we’ve only just finished the repairs from the last wave. The guards are on their way, but we’ll need your help in the meantime.”

“Of course,” Meilin said.

Xanthe measured up their group. “Conor, Takoda, and I will take one wheel. Meilin can help you, Ingailor. That should be enough strength on both sides to do it. Once the guards arrive, they can take over.”

Xanthe sifted through a pouch at her waist. Her hand came out with a small glowing pink globe, no bigger than a marble. Standing at the lip of the tunnel opening, she lanced it as high as she could over the slate plain.

It lit the glossy stone below like soft fire, casting a pink glow that brought out constellations of glittery highlights within the rock.

Revealing the Many.

A few dozen of the monsters were halfway across. They'd been creeping toward them in the darkness, but in the shock of the sudden light they staggered, reeling back and gasping. Before Conor's eyes, he saw them scrunch their eyelids shut and press forward, crawling on all fours, shockingly fast.

He imagined those creatures—the kind of creature *he* would become once the parasite got to his forehead—lurching forward, hunting them, their long-nailed hands groping through the darkness. His body broke into shudders, and he couldn't make it stop.

“Release it!” he gasped. “Release the water!”

“Stay calm!” Ingailor commanded. “It will take the Many a few more minutes to cross the plain. The bulk of the horde is behind them, and we need to catch as many as possible in our trap.”

In an attempt to calm himself, Conor imagined the most peaceful thing he could: his old herd. He pictured the sheep's soft curly fur, smelled the wet musty scent of their skin, listened to their soft bleats as they chewed grass. It was enough of a distraction to keep the terror at bay—almost. Then Xanthe threw another one of her stones and illuminated the plain again. Conor's sheep vanished from his mind for good.

The plain was swarming with the Many—at least a thousand of them, staggering and lurching across the smooth, glittering surface, crawling over one another in their unthinking haste. They all froze for a moment under the brilliant light, then it faded and Conor was blind again. He closed his eyes, biting back his terror, and flailed in the darkness until he contacted one of the wheel's handles. He almost started turning it on his own, but stopped himself just in time, instead grinding his palms into his wheel. *Just let us release the dam!* he silently pleaded.

The nearest of the Many hadn't been more than twenty feet away, and they were moving fast.

“Hold ... hold ... and *now!*” Ingailor cried. “The wheels!”

Gasping in relief, Conor began to turn his handle. With Xanthe and Takoda straining beside him, the wheel began to shift. From a few feet away, he could hear Meilin and Ingailor’s wheel groan and shudder as it, too, lurched into motion.

“It’s working!” he heard Meilin exclaim.

Which was when Conor’s wheel stopped.

“Is it supposed to do this?” Takoda asked.

“No!” Xanthe said frantically. “It’s jammed. It’s jammed!”

They heaved, but the wheel gave only an inch or two before springing back to its original position.

“Ingailor!” Xanthe shrieked.

Conor could hear the Many right under their ledge: the sound of their fingernails scratching against the stone, their grunts and moans as they tried to scramble up to get them. Conor imagined they’d mound up soon, start to climb one another ... and then they’d be upon them, and all would be lost.

Conor tugged frantically, but the wheel was still stuck.

“Xanthe?” Ingailor called over, concerned. “What’s happening? The gate’s not opening!”

“I have to do it,” Takoda said.

“What do you mean?” Xanthe asked, perplexed.

But Conor knew precisely what Takoda meant. There was a radiant flash and a popping sound, then a heavy weight hit the ground beside him.

“What the—?” Xanthe said, shocked.

Conor heard a familiar grunt, and then Kovo was beside him, the gorilla’s coarse hair bristling against Conor’s arm as he took a place at the wheel. Conor felt a rough hand over his own and realized the ape wanted his handle, too. He leaped out of the way. Startled, Xanthe tumbled beside him.

“You have a spirit animal?” she asked.

“It’s ... more like he has me,” Takoda said ruefully. “But yes.”

With a scream of metal, their wheel began to turn. Kovo grunted as he slapped the handles, getting up more and more speed until they were whizzing past.

“It’s working! It’s open!” Ingailor called.

Kovo seemed to be enjoying himself. He continued to pelt the wheel,

pushing it faster and faster.

“Hey!” Takoda said sternly. “Stop now.”

The ape roared in anger at Takoda, baring his sharp teeth.

“*Please,*” said Takoda. Before the boy’s pleading eyes, the anger drained out of Kovo.

“Listen!” Xanthe said excitedly. Her eyes had been on the plain ever since their wheel started turning. “Water!”

Conor heard the rushing sound, too.

So did the Many. They began to scream, an awful, high-pitched sound.

Xanthe took another stone from her pouch, this one a pale green color, wider and flatter than the previous. She hurled it to the ceiling of the cavern, where it struck and splattered, green goo softly illuminating the scene below.

The light came just in time to reveal an enormous wave of black water as it struck. It had such force behind it that the first rows of the Many disappeared entirely, swept deep into the dark, surging tide. More and more fell beneath it, their screams cutting off short as the water swept across the plain, bowling over ghoulish white bodies and dragging them under.

Conor watched the trap do its deadly work. Once the water began to slow into a swift current without any whitecaps, he could see that none of the Many remained. The sudden black river had seized them all.

“Where did they *go*?” Conor asked. He’d expected to feel joy at seeing the monsters swept away. Instead, the gaping emptiness of the plain stood as a painful reminder of his own plight. Though they called them monsters now, the Many had once been people, just like him.

“Rivers run throughout Sadre,” Xanthe said grimly. “The tunnels we use are all old riverbeds. This water will flow in a thousand different directions, into the deepest parts of the earth. That’s where the Many have been dragged. Those who haven’t drowned are lost forever.”

“Will any survive?” Meilin asked.

“It’s unlikely,” Xanthe said, staring back across the plain. “Though we’ve never swept quite this many down before.”

“It’s so sad,” Conor said.

Meilin squeezed his arm.

“Ingailor, I’ll put out a call for workers to come set the trap again,” Xanthe said.

There was no answer.

“Ingailor?” Xanthe turned around and gasped.

Ingailor’s pink eyes were wide, his hands held in shock over his chest. Once Xanthe saw what he was looking at, she took a step back in surprise.

They were staring at Kovo. Illuminated by the soft green light from above, the ape looked especially fearsome. The tips of his jet-black hair were lit by faerie fire, broadening his already massive physique. He stood on all fours, taking them all in. The expression in his scarlet eyes was inscrutable, but the one thing about Kovo that was unmistakable, ever unmistakable, was his brutal intelligence.

“So ... I guess I should tell you that we have spirit animals,” Conor said. “This is Takoda’s.”

Xanthe stared forward, her voice softened by awe, her eyes shining. “Is this who I think it is?”

“Oh, you recognize him?” Meilin asked with a nervous sigh. “The Great Beasts of Erdas died and have been reborn as spirit animals. That’s what caused the Evertree’s roots to regrow six months ago. Conor, Takoda, and I *all* summoned Great Beasts. So you don’t have to be afraid of Kovo ... probably.”

“You don’t understand my question,” Xanthe said, turning her shocked eyes on Meilin.

“I think I *do* understand,” Takoda said, shaking his head. “When you told us the origin of Sadre, you said that the wisest of the Great Beasts taught the Hellans about the Wyrms. We assumed you were talking about Tellun ... but you weren’t, were you?”

Xanthe shook her head, staring reverently at the ape. When she spoke, it was directly to him. “No. The one who was trying to save the world was Kovo. It was you.”



NORTH, SOUTH, WEST

THE TRIBE OFFERED ABEKE AND ROLLAN HORSES TO ride. Rollan thought nothing of it—Greenhaven had three stables full of them, so giving up a horse or two seemed like no big deal—but Abeke bowed low and thanked them effusively.

“Giving up a work animal is a tremendous sacrifice for a nomad tribe,” she explained as she adjusted her horse’s saddle pads and shortened its stirrups. “They must have spent years traveling with these horses, raising them from colts.”

Aynar had mapped them a trail that would lead back to the *Tellun’s Pride II* over paths solid enough for the horses. They’d follow the swath of muddied grass the yak herd had left behind, head due east along a valley between two mountains, and cross an open plain to the pier where their ship was moored. Sticking to terrain suitable for horses meant traveling a longer distance, but with mounts they should be back by the end of the day.

“I’m relieved we have a new way to go,” Abeke said. “If Zerif is tailing us, it’s safest to press forward and not loop back.”

Anda watched patiently as his new companions mounted up. Tellun wasn’t a particularly demonstrative elk, but he did stand very close to the boy, his broad chest right behind Anda’s shoulders. Whenever he leaned back and scratched through Tellun’s white and gold fur, the elk scrunched his eyes in stoic pleasure.

Rollan shook his head, mystified. “Anda is scratching the *leader of the*

Great Beasts.”

“Not just scratching him,” Abeke said as she mounted her horse.

“What do you mean?” Rollan asked.

“Did you notice how many horses there are? And how many riders?”

Rollan’s jaw dropped open. “Wait. You don’t mean—”

And then it happened. Anda elegantly wrapped his long arms around Tellun’s neck and launched from the earth, swinging around to land neatly on the Great Elk’s back.

“You do realize *who* you’re riding, right?” Rollan asked out of the side of his mouth.

“Yes,” Anda said, smiling. “My friend!”

“And you’re fine with this?” Rollan asked Tellun, shaking his head.

“Why not?” Abeke said. “We rode him to the Evertree.”

“That was different,” Rollan sniffed.

In reply, the elk raised his antlers haughtily into the air and bounded down the beaten path. Anda threw his arms around his neck to hold on.

“At least Anda didn’t put a saddle on him,” Rollan grumbled as he kicked his own horse into motion. “That would have been simply too much.”



Sure, Rollan figured, the tribe might have made a big sacrifice by offering them two horses, but they’d clearly been strategic about *which* two horses they gave up. Rollan’s had the approximate speed and power of a bread box. Abeke’s kept slobbering everywhere, and tried to throw her twice within the first fifty paces. Though an elk was by no means a traditional mount for any human, it was soon clear that Anda would be making far better time than Rollan and Abeke. “Say hi to everyone at Greenhaven for us!” Rollan called as the boy pulled farther and farther ahead.

Essix didn’t seem to know what to do with herself. At first, with millennia-honed instinct, she forgot about Rollan entirely and flew above Tellun instead. Then, after about an hour of travel, she returned to Rollan’s side. She made a piercing, confused cry, her eyes darting around. She took off back toward Tellun, then thought better of it and returned to Rollan, then took off again and returned to Tellun, soon returning to Rollan’s side.

“I know,” Rollan told her. “It’s confusing to me, too. It’s Tellun, but he’s

not using his boomy voice.”

Uraza seemed to be taking everything in stride—but then again, the leopard had never been one to lose her cool. She loped along beside Abeke’s persnickety horse, low to the ground, frequently stopping to sniff the air or the base of a tree.

“There must be new smells around here for our kitty cat,” Rollan said to Abeke, trying to kick some extra speed from his horse as it tiptoed along the ground. At this rate, it would be winter before they made it to the boat.

“It’s not that,” Abeke said with a worried expression. “Her nose is many times more sensitive than ours. I think she’s detecting something amiss.”

Uraza paused and looked up at Rollan with her wide lavender eyes, as if to say, *See? Show a little more respect.*

“Which direction?” Rollan asked.

Uraza flicked her gaze north. Rollan pivoted in his saddle to look that way. All he could see were the white-capped cliffs of distant mountains, skirted by a broad, flat plain and isolated clumps of desperate pines. A small plume of dust was at the horizon, but that could have been caused by any number of things. “Well, good thing we’re heading east and not north, then,” Rollan said.

They continued, following the distant blip of Anda and Tellun as boy and elk easily picked their way over rocky terrain.

Rollan decided it was time for a better view. He scanned the sky for Essix, then began to focus on her shape. Nothing happened for a long moment, then suddenly the world pitched and the ground fell away. Rollan felt momentarily sick—no amount of practice had ever helped that—but soon he was able to see the world through Essix’s eyes. The falcon felt him enter her mind and churred companionably.

At first Rollan used Essix’s high vantage point to look north, but he couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary, couldn’t tell what Uraza might be smelling.

West was another story.

When Rollan followed Essix’s vision around the plains, he came up with nothing the first few times. But then he heard Essix shriek, and grew alert. With her telescopic vision, Essix zeroed in on an abandoned campsite. Whoever had left it behind had been careful to cover their tracks—the

surrounding ground was smoothed over, and the blackened stones of the fire pit had been scattered. But there was still the faintest burning ember in one of the fire logs, trailing up a whisper of smoke. Vision less acute than Essix's would have missed it.

Rollan returned his consciousness to his own body with a dizzying lurch, and called out to Abeke to hold up. At the same time, he saw that Anda and Tellun were making their way back to them. They met under the shelter of a broad, leafy tree. Rollan's thoughts flicked to the ailing Evertree, and he realized that even this brief moment of relief after finding Tellun might have been too much of an indulgence.

Anda and Tellun were wearing concerned expressions even before Abeke told them that Uraza had scented intruders to the north. When Rollan added that Essix had spotted an abandoned campfire to the west, Anda gave a grim smile. "Tellun is upset as well. But he keeps looking to the south."

"We can't all be correct," Abeke said.

"We'd best hope that we're not all correct," Rollan said. "Otherwise, we're nearly surrounded."

"I'm not a ranger," Anda said. "But I can only think that this doesn't change our plan. We're heading through that valley to the east. So far, that's also the only direction where we haven't sensed any danger."

"I agree," Abeke said. "And let's have our wits about us as we go."

"Being especially alert, of course, to anything that might be approaching from the west," Rollan said.

He watched Abeke try—and fail—to hide her smile. "By west, I think you meant north," she said.

"Or rather south," Anda said, smiling as well. Then his expression grew serious. "Regardless of the direction of the threat, Tellun and I won't scout ahead anymore. We should stay close, to defend one another."

They started moving again. To the east appeared two large mountains flanking a narrow valley, just as Aynar had told them. Anda and Abeke picked up their pace, but Rollan immediately felt himself falling behind. His horse was simply too old and too ornery to keep up with the others. Abeke and Anda stopped to wait for him after a few minutes, and when Rollan reached them, Anda laid his hand on Tellun's forehead, right between the antlers. The two communed for a moment, and then Rollan's mount whickered. The

tension drained out of the horse's body, and when Anda and Tellun took off again, Rollan's horse followed perkily, as spry as a colt.

Rollan didn't even need to hold on to the reins, his horse had become that sure and graceful. "What just happened?" he called to Anda.

"I'm ... not totally sure," Anda said. "I have only inklings of Tellun's skill so far. We haven't been together for long. But I think he can communicate freely with any animal he meets."

Abeke pulled up alongside them. "You're well paired. You were the listener of your tribe, and Tellun has served a similar role for the Great Beasts. He has always been a quiet leader."

Anda stroked Tellun's long neck as he rode. "It's nice to feel understood."

Abeke pulled her hair behind her so she could see forward better. "You know, my father always wanted me to be pretty and refined, like my sister Soama. But that wasn't who I was: I was a hunter. I preferred the solitude of the plains, with my bow in hand."

A flicker of pain passed over Anda's features. "My father wished for a hunter. But he got me. I can hunt mushrooms and healing herbs, but that's about the extent of it."

"It can take time," Abeke said. "But he'll come around. You summoned Tellun. Your story will become one of your people's legends. My father and I only started to understand each other recently, but our love was there all along."

"I miss my tribe already," Anda said simply. "I miss them very much."

As they neared the twin mountains, they left the herd's beaten trail entirely and picked their way through scabbly brush. Though Rollan's horse was no longer resistant and cranky, it did start to slow from sheer exhaustion. She dropped her neck and stumbled, a sure sign the mare was nearing her limits. At one point, Anda called the group to a stop.

"I hate to say it, but I think we should camp and find the ship in the morning," Anda said.

Rollan nodded gratefully.

"Why?" Abeke asked. "There's still plenty of daylight."

"Look how high the mountains rise on either side of the valley where we must pass," Anda said. "Once we're in the canyon between them, they'll block out any light that isn't directly overhead. The sun will set hours early in

that valley. We'll be in the dark, with only two access points. If we're attacked, we could easily be overwhelmed."

"Oh," Abeke said. "I hadn't considered that."

"We'll have to camp one night," Rollan said. "It'll be cold, but it's best not to make a campfire. An attack could easily come from the west."

"Or north," Abeke said.

"Or south," Anda said.

"Let's hope none of us are right," Rollan said.

"We've assigned night watches before," Abeke said. "And we've handled anything that came at us."

"That may be true," Anda said, "but we have a saying, *oranu yeno simula oranu mordico*. 'A confident plainsman is a dead plainsman.' Let's camp once we reach the base of the mountains. I'll feel safer with a cliff face at our backs."

Rollan hated the idea of being without good shelter at night in the whispering plains. All the same, he was glad they had decided not to press forward. The prospect of navigating a night-dark alley between steep, foreboding mountains was none too appealing.

Though it was afternoon, once the cliff blocked the sunlight, the chill of twilight entered their bones. As they assembled their bedrolls and made camp, Uraza was the first to start shivering. Abeke called the leopard into passive state so the tropical cat wouldn't suffer. Essix had techniques to keep herself warm, though the normally regal gyrfalcon did look a trifle silly with her feathers puffed out, more like a ruffled chicken than a bird of prey. Tellun and Anda were the only ones who seemed fully at ease, standing on the rocky ground and staring out watchfully.

After a simple cold meal of seeds and greens, they settled in for the night. Once Tellun had chosen a position and lay down, it was impossible to resist putting their bedrolls alongside him to warm themselves against his fur. Rollan felt a little scandalous, using the greatest of the Great Beasts for his body heat.

"Do you think you'll be able to fall asleep, Rollan?" Anda asked while they stretched out on their backs. The first stars were twinkling in the slate sky.

"Hmm whaa ... ?" Rollan asked. Anda's question had caught him mid-

yawn.

“You go to sleep if you can. I’ll take first watch. I’d like to replace Abeke’s neck dressings, anyway. Then I’ll switch off to her, and you can take the last watch.”

“Sounds just fi-iine to me,” Rollan said around another yawn. “How’s your neck doing, by the way?”

“Much better,” Abeke said. Rollan could hear the smile in her voice. “Thanks to Anda.”

“Yes, thanks to Anda,” Rollan said. “And we should all thank Tellun, for being so very snuggly.” Rollan wriggled his hands under the elk’s warm body, and the greatest of the Great Beasts snorted in response.



Despite the cold, Rollan slept deeply. He dreamed of Arctica, of balancing on an ice floe with Meilin, giggling as it tilted, trying to keep their balance as each jostled the other. Jhi and Essix were on two more floes nearby, bobbing in a frigid sea, watching. It only slowly dawned on Rollan that they were strangely impassive, even as Rollan and Meilin were having the time of their lives.

Come on, Essix, Rollan thought in the dream. Lighten up!

Dream-Essix looked at him like a stranger. Then she opened her mouth, and rolls of black rot came streaming out. It flooded her floe, tipping the bird into the icy depths. Then Jhi was retching black rot, too, and Meilin was screaming and tipping in.

Then—slam—the dream was over. Rollan was suddenly awake and gasping, hands patting the cord of rope that tied his pants, groggily searching for his dagger sheath. The dream was over, but a very real pain was wracking his body. His insides felt like they’d wrapped around a giant’s fist, then yanked out of his body.

“What happened?” came a startled voice. Anda.

“I don’t know,” Rollan managed to say. Then, before he could say anything more, it happened again. The giant yanked his insides to the horizon and let them snap back. He rolled onto his side, face contorted in pain.

“Argh!”

Now that he was awake for it, Rollan heard Anda scream, and Abeke, too.

“Rollan, what’s happening?” she cried.

“I don’t know,” he gasped.

But then he did. He recognized this awful pain. Rollan had felt it once before, under a bloodred sky at the end of the world. “Our spirit animal bonds!” he shouted. “They’re breakin—*ahh!*”

Once more, his guts wrenched.

“I don’t understand,” Anda said, his voice unsteady with fear. “Why is this happening to us?”

Rollan sat up, hugging his arms around his torso for comfort while he waited for the next tremor.

They breathed in silence in the darkness, waiting for the next wave of the pain. But it didn’t come.

“Our bonds are under attack,” Abeke said to Anda, her breathing slowly returning to normal. “I think ... I think it’s because the Evertree is sick.”

“It—it was horrible,” Anda stammered in the near darkness. “Like something was punching my spine.”

“Essix?” Rollan called, remembering his dream. Though he could see the outline of the falcon nearby in the dim light, for once he didn’t have an inherent sense of where she was. It was a bleak and empty feeling, like grief.

Then the fluffy cold-weather version of Essix edged over to Rollan and snuggled in close. Gradually, as if it had been frozen in a block of ice that was slowly melting, Rollan’s link to Essix was returning. But it still felt like a small, frailer version of what it once was.

“Abeke ...” Rollan said. “Something’s changed.”

“I feel it, too,” she said grimly. “My link to Uraza feels ... cold.”

“I think it might be coming back to me and Essix, slowly. Maybe we’ll be okay in the morning.”

Anda reached his arms around Tellun, his eyes closed tight. “I can’t tell,” he murmured.

“There’s nothing we can do now,” Abeke said. “I’ll summon Uraza in the morning and see where things stand.”

“You’re right,” Rollan said, nodding. “Get some rest.” Then he turned to Anda. “I’ll take my watch now.”

“Wake us at the first sign of danger,” Abeke whispered.

They must have been truly exhausted; neither Anda nor Abeke put up a

fight, and were soon huddled into themselves, out cold.

Normally Rollan found it hard to stay awake when he was on watch, but there would be no trouble with that tonight. He sat up, rigid with worry, and listened to the noises of the Amayan night. Hugging his knees close, he scanned the near dark and listened to frogs, insects, and the first warm-ups of morning songbirds. One was particularly insistent, and was soon met by another answering call from far off.

Probably two birds falling in love from afar, Rollan thought grumpily. At least they're happy. I'm just cold. And worried.

His thoughts went to Meilin. Essix hadn't been the only spirit animal in his dream—wherever she was, had Meilin felt a similar rupture to her bond with Jhi? He hoped she was more comfortable tonight than he was, sleepless in this chilly air and waiting for danger to strike. Had she and Conor found the mysterious door? He wished that they could all be together, camping with Tellun.

But Meilin wasn't there, so Rollan would have to spend his watch with only Essix for company. At least the falcon was sticking close—she probably felt as confused as he did by the near loss of their bond. He stared out into the blackness, taking comfort from the slow rise and fall of his friends' breathing and Essix's little chirps. The falcon readjusted herself on Rollan's arm, fluffing and unfluffing her feathers, trying to find the right temperature.

"Are we okay?" Rollan whispered to the falcon. But though he could make a guess, he had no idea what she was feeling. He could only pray the connection returned soon.

Throughout it all, the songbirds continued their happy chirping. There were three of them now, Rollan realized. One from the north, one from the south, and one ... from the west.

Filling with dread, Rollan rose quietly to his feet and unsheathed his dagger. He could see from the silvered outline of the twin mountains that the sun had dawned on the other side, but their massive forms were still blocking most of the light.

He was nervous but wasn't sure if he needed to awaken Abeke and Anda yet.

"Essix," Rollan whispered, "can you see enough to scout around?"

Before he had even finished asking, Essix took to the air, rising into the

night as silent as a whisper.

Rollan held still and opened his senses as much as he could. The songbirds were coming closer. Songbirds in the night? Closing in from three directions?

His intuition set off alarms. “Anda, Abeke!” he hissed. “Get up!”

Whatever was hunting him must have been waiting for him to make a noise, because the moment Rollan spoke was the moment the first animal struck, from out of nowhere. Something sharp locked on Rollan’s hamstring. He couldn’t see enough to know what it was that had attacked him, but it was strong enough to yank him to the ground. Rollan flailed, trying to get back to his feet even as his attacker bit deeper and pulled.

A man shouted, with a voice Rollan recognized but couldn’t quite place, and then the clearing was suddenly full of noise as attackers closed in. They came not from the west, the north, or the south.

They came from all three.



VICTORY

THE GROUP WAS GRIPPED BY A QUEASY SILENCE ALL THE way back to Phos Astos. Unbidden, Meilin’s mind kept replaying the sight of those white bodies struggling to get above frothing black water, inevitably failing and being swept under. She shivered. Carried off into the watery depths—it was a horrific way to go. Despite herself, she hoped at least a few of the monstrous creatures had somehow survived.

When the tunnel started to glow pink-green, Meilin knew they were nearing Phos Astos. Then they emerged into the main cavern, and she was again struck by the beauty of the lively oasis, glowing warmly in the midst of so many tons of dark and impenetrable rock. The nervous chatter of the Sadreans carried down the ruddy light of the entrance tunnel. Once she and the others had stepped out into the full light of the city, Meilin saw a ripple pass through them as they remarked on the strangers’ return. The Sadreans paused in their tasks, became still and watchful, waiting for news.

Ingailor raised a hand to the watching crowd. “You can return to your duties,” he said. “The Many attacked, but they have been fought off.” There was no cheering, only grim nods, rustling, and murmurs as everyone returned to work. Fighting off the Many was clearly something that had happened often before. Even so, most looked up every few seconds to scan their surroundings as they returned to work.

The last to emerge from the tunnel was Takoda—with Kovo. The moment the gorilla clambered down the handholds in the stone wall and thudded to the cave floor, the cavern of Phos Astos filled with audible gasps. Men and

women fell to their knees where they were, bowing their foreheads to the ground in reverence. A complicated and almost wistful expression on his face, Kovo grunted and paced, finally working his way to the center of the cavern. There, he stood up on two legs and slowly pivoted, taking in the sight of the people he had tasked eons ago to found their underground civilization. He roared.

The youngest of the Sadreans screamed, their shrieks joining the gorilla's roar and reverberating through the walls. The echoes strengthened one another until the noise sounded more like the rumbling of the earth than animal cries. Then the gorilla stopped, and gradually the cavern grew quiet.

Most of the Sadreans stood where they were along the edges of the giant mushrooms, but then the elders from the mural room made their way to the floor, expertly clambering down the handholds carved into the fiber. When they arrived, they formed a semicircle around the group.

One by one, the elders knelt, while Kovo lowered himself to the rock floor. One of the elders ran her hand over the shimmering fungus on the ground, then tentatively brought it toward the mighty ape. Meilin expected to see him bare his teeth, but Kovo stared into the distance coolly as the woman traced five lines across his cheek. Then the woman took another handful of color and traced it over her own cheek.

Each of the elders came forward and did the same, choosing a different part of Kovo to honor and leaving a mark on the same spot of their own bodies. Ingailor was the last, placing a pink handprint on Kovo's chest and then one on his own. The ape bowed his head, acknowledging their ancient agreement. Meilin watching silently, not wanting to break the spell.

"Xanthe," she finally whispered, nodding deferentially to the elders, "would it be okay if I showed them Jhi?"

"Of course!" Xanthe said. "We would be honored."

Meilin brought the panda out, and Jhi emerged right over a small bush of round mushrooms, squashing them flat and letting out an iridescent pink-green cloud of spores. The panda looked around in surprise, then saw Meilin and bounded over, making a groaning sound that Meilin recognized as the sign of Jhi's purest joy. Meilin threw her arms around her closest friend, breathing in the eucalyptus smell of Jhi's fur, somehow constant through all of the panda's appearances and disappearings. Immediately Jhi was covered in

color, from the moist tip of her nose to the soles of her feet. She looked delighted by it.

Conor summoned Briggan, and the wolf was soon painted as well, though due to his thicker fur the color appeared only at the tips, giving him a shimmering aura. Briggan nuzzled Conor joyously, and Conor buried his face in his friend's fur. Then they seemed to simultaneously remember where they were and got to their feet. The people of Phos Astos were watching them silently, smiles on their faces. Even Kovo's mouth split into something that might have been a smirk.

"Let us rejoice tonight!" Ingailor called. "We have once again defeated the Many, and Great Beasts have come to Phos Astos."

As the cheer died down, Jhi's stomach growled.

Xanthe scrutinized the panda's belly, and then she, too, threw her arms around Jhi. "It took me a moment to realize what that strange sound was," she said. "You must all be starving. Come to my house. We'll feast!"



"This isn't precisely what I'd call a feast, not exactly," Conor said through tight lips.

"Speak for yourself," Meilin said. "I'm enjoying it immensely." She lifted her bowl to her lips and downed a huge mouthful of food, smacking her lips in satisfaction. The food was strangely tasty, considering it consisted of boiled mushroom cubes and some kelp-like black weed. Though they looked the same, some of the mushrooms were peppery and some were sweet. Meilin had Conor on one side, but she'd spent most of the meal talking to Xanthe's uncle on the other. His job was to distinguish and combine the various flavors.

Once they'd eaten, Xanthe escorted the group through a series of passageways, up into some mushroom towers and out through others, until they were at the far side of Phos Astos. Once there, she asked them to bring their spirit animals into passive state, as they'd have to climb slender rope ladders to reach her clan's sleeping quarters. Kovo was the last to go into his dormant state, giving the city a longing glance over his shoulder before he did. The ape had enjoyed the adoration he'd gotten from the Sadreans.

They climbed up more braided ropes that led to three ledges carved in the cavern's rock walls. At the top, they plopped to the ground to rest. Once they

were ready, Xanthe led the companions up the last few paces to a freestanding mushroom tower. An open portal fed to a dim interior room. As they entered, Sadrean children leaped down from rows of beds that had been cut out of the sides of the mushroom. They peered shyly from behind Xanthe.

Tiny pale faces with giant pink eyes—Sadrean children were surprisingly adorable, Meilin thought.

“Some of these are blood relatives and some lost their parents, like I once did,” Xanthe explained. “But we’re all brothers and sisters now.”

“War makes orphans everywhere,” Takoda said. He tousled the hair of one of the little girls, who patted it down furiously. Takoda messed it up all over again, and this time she broke into a giggling smile. Xanthe’s brothers and sisters soon got over their shyness and surrounded the upsiders, touching their garments curiously and asking dozens of questions about life on the surface.

“Let’s give them some space,” Xanthe finally told her siblings. “My new friends have had a long journey, and they’re very tired.”

Xanthe carved a path through her siblings and led Meilin, Conor, and Takoda to the rear of the chamber, where she pointed to four empty bunks carved into the rounded wall. “Have as long a rest as you need. You all deserve it.”

“I guess it’s hard to say ‘I’ll wake you in the morning’ when there’s no morning, huh?” Conor said.

“We have a water clock to keep time,” Xanthe said. “It’s night on the surface right now, actually.”

Meilin, Conor, and Takoda slotted their few belongings into cubbies at the foot of their bunks and settled in. Xanthe disappeared for a moment and returned with soft, shimmering black blankets. At first the blanket felt clammy over Meilin’s body, but soon it warmed and turned supple. She would sleep just fine.

“Good night,” Meilin said to the others as she slid into the bunk.

“I guess it is night,” Takoda sleepily responded. “Not that it matters down here. It’s a striking shift in perspective. What a marvelous opportunity for self-reflection.”

“Sure ...” Meilin said, voice already weakening as she drifted off, “... absolutely marvelous.” *Good night, Rollan*, she mouthed to herself,

wondering where he was.



Meilin dreamed of Jhi. She'd once had a poisoned bond with the panda, but ever since she'd been cured, Jhi was with her every sleeping moment. Sometimes the dreams were about Meilin's life—her childhood in Zhong, memories of her father or, more distantly, her mother. But other times she dreamed of places she had never been, places that must have been part of Jhi's memories instead. They'd wander into a cloudy forest of bamboo, with giant sloths swaying in the treetops, creatures that no longer existed on Erdas.

This was one of those nights. Meilin wandered that familiar dream forest, listening to the wind in the trees. Jhi was leading the way. Well, Jhi was more ambling the way, wandering among the stems, selecting the youngest shoots and passing every other one back for Meilin to eat. She ate them happily as she stared into the clouds—they tasted slightly spicy, like chives.

The openness of the dream space was such a pleasant break from sky-less Sadre. One of the clouds looked a little like Rollan. Well, not exactly, but it had the same goofy chin. *Jhi*, Meilin called in the dream, *come see Rollan!*

But Jhi wasn't there anymore. Meilin whirled in the bamboo forest. The beauty of her surroundings had turned ominous. She was alone.

Meilin checked her arm, but the tattoo wasn't there—Jhi wasn't passive, but missing. Panic coursing through her, she ran heedlessly through the forest, calling out Jhi's name. Leaves caught and dragged at her hair, scratching her arms and face. There were no monsters or terrors here, but all the same Meilin felt a sinister kind of fear at being so alone. She crashed through a thicket of bamboo, and suddenly she was in open black space, falling slowly down a chasm.

She felt her spine wrench and twist as she fell—

—and woke up screaming. Meilin sat up, gasping and soaked in sweat. The wrenching pain came once again, and it took all of Meilin's will not to give in to the torment and buckle over. Marshaling her training, she made herself stand. The terrible pain ebbed, leaving her a shred of control over her senses. The first thing she did was roll up her sleeve and check her arm for Jhi's tattoo. It was there. She hadn't lost Jhi in the real world.

It dawned on Meilin that someone was shrieking, had been shrieking

since she woke up. She fell into a fighter's crouch, staring around in alarm.

It wasn't a person making the sound, she realized, but more like the anguished hiss of steam leaving a kettle. The screamers. The alarm had been tripped.

"Conor! Takoda!" she said. But their beds were empty. She whirled, and found they all were vacant, rimmed in their usual phosphorescent pink-green. The incessant whine of the screamers continued. Between that noise and her painful awakening, Meilin was finding it hard to get her thoughts into any order. She clamped her hands over her ears and gritted her teeth so she wouldn't start screaming herself.

Meilin grabbed her quarterstaff and staggered toward the exit, shaking her head in hopes of clearing it. Once she was out of the tight confines of the sleeping chamber, she summoned Jhi. It took longer for the panda to arrive, but when she finally did, Meilin calmed. Jhi startled in the dim light and blaring noise, then Meilin saw her ears wag, and the noise suddenly stopped.

They were surrounded by a sphere of stillness.

"Jhi," Meilin whispered, "I didn't know you could do that."

Jhi nodded but looked at her glassily. Meilin felt a strange and uncomfortable distance between them. She wanted to ask what was wrong, but there wasn't time. "Come," she said, a hand on Jhi's back. "We need to find Conor and Takoda!"

Jhi didn't answer. When Meilin looked at her, she realized why.

The panda was staring out at the lights of Phos Astos. At first Meilin thought the lights were shimmering, but she quickly realized what was happening: The beautiful city was under assault. The Many were crawling over the mushroom towers like a plague of insects, making ripples in the glowing light. They climbed senselessly, moving up the mushrooms in pulsating waves, many of them tumbling to their deaths. But an ever-growing swarm was ready to take their place. The far half of the city was overrun—Meilin saw terrified families emerge from their homes, only to fall under the onslaught. She watched in horror as one of the ghoulish monsters broke into the spider pen and began eating the small animals—another entered the weavers' quarters, exiting with blood on his clawed hands.

Jhi groaned and pointed her paw at the ceiling.

Ghouls were falling like rain.

The Many had managed to navigate the warren of tunnels to the updraft entrance. A long line of them slowly descended in the lazy hot air, thronging in one pale groaning mass at the first net before spilling over into the next. From there they spread out hungrily into Phos Astos, swarming the city like ants on a bean cake.

Meilin shook off her horror. There was a big fight to come, and terror would do her no good. Beside her, one of Xanthe's siblings slipped past, grabbed a braided rope without losing any speed, and disappeared over the side of the mushroom, down to the next ledge.

"Where are you going?" Meilin called after her. But there was no answer.

What she did hear was the howl of a wolf from one of the ledges below. Briggan and Conor were already out and fighting. "Jhi, get ready!" Meilin cried. "We're joining them!"

She sprinted toward the braided rope ladder and grabbed it, allowing her momentum to kick her legs over the edge. Her hands held on tight to the rope and she spun, sliding down without losing any momentum.

While she was in the air, she did something she and Jhi had worked on during her months in Zhong: She called Jhi into her passive state as she contacted the rope, then sped down the length, where she quickly summoned the panda again. They'd gotten the high-speed summoning down to a science, but this time her bond seemed to shudder under the stress. A fraying pain whipped into the core of Meilin.

The distraction of it made her miss her target; girl and panda tumbled right onto the coarse fur of Briggan's back. The wolf yelped in surprise and pivoted, his mouth in a snarl. When he saw who he'd cushioned, his tongue lolled out in happiness.

The four of them were alone on a broad ledge of rock. Conor stood at the lip and stared over, his ax out and ready.

"Conor!" Meilin cried.

He turned, surprised. His expression softened when he saw his friend, but then tightened back up with worry. "Another wave's coming—Meilin, get ready!"

Meilin didn't need to ask what he meant: A ghostly-white hand appeared at the lip of the ledge, followed by another and another. With hideous grunting sounds, the arms and heads of the ghastly creatures appeared.

Briggan lunged, one of the monsters' limbs instantly crunching within his jaws. With a flick of his head, he flung the ghoul over the side.

But more of the Many were appearing, and two of them soon had their long-nailed fingers around Briggan's tail. The wolf danced and kicked, trying to free himself. Caught off-guard, one fell away—only to meet Jhi's paw. With one mighty swipe, the panda sent the creature skittering across the ledge and into the void. Another of the Many got to its feet, only to face Conor's ax, which swung through the pink-green light and slammed into its face. With a shriek of pain, the monster staggered backward—following the last one right over the edge. It fell screaming into the open air, the sound lasting a full second before it cut off in a sickening gargle.

Four more of the Many appeared, and rather than falling into her customary fighting crouch, Meilin leaped into the air, whipping her quarterstaff in a wide, singing arc, cracking into the neck of one monster and bowling it into the next and the next, so that all three went screaming into the darkness.

“Good one!” Conor cried.

“My bond with Jhi ...” Meilin said breathlessly, joining Conor at the edge as he stomped on the hands of the Many whenever they appeared. “Something happened. It's weaker—”

“I felt it, too,” Conor said. “Then I heard the alarm. There must not have been time to repair the dam.” He grunted as he lifted the hand of a particularly strong creature and flung it over the edge.

Meilin remembered her remorse over drowning the horde and cursed her own soft heart. “Where's Takoda?” she asked.

This wave of attackers finished, Conor managed a wicked grin. “Look below.”

Jhi and Meilin cautiously leaned over the edge and peered down. There, on a wider ledge directly below theirs, Takoda and Kovo were facing their own batch of the Many. Because their position was lower, they confronted a much larger throng—Conor and Meilin had been fighting only the trickle that made it past the powerful ape. Takoda had mounted Kovo's back and had his slender arms wrapped around the gorilla's neck.

Kovo had his arms held out wide and was turning in low circles, flailing any of the Many that were unfortunate enough to fall within his reach and

sending them screaming over the edge. Any time Kovo windmilled his arms, only the ghouls at the far sides of the ledge survived to climb up toward Conor and Meilin. Before her eyes, Meilin saw one of them emerge, only to become a rag toy in Briggan's powerful teeth.

"Any sign of Xanthe?" Meilin asked.

Conor shook his head. "She must be off defending another part of the city."

"How do we get out of here?" Meilin asked. When the head of one of the Many appeared over the edge, she brought her quarterstaff down in a fierce overhead blow, knocking the creature senseless. It tumbled away, arms pinwheeling through the air.

"We've got to get down to Takoda's ledge," Conor said. "It's our only hope. The cavern floor is below it. Once we get that far, maybe we can find a passage that will take us away from here. Only problem is this." Conor held up the climbing rope, which had been severed in the fighting.

"Wait. What do you mean, 'away from here'? We can't abandon Phos Astos—it's the last standing city in Sadre!"

"Have you seen the destruction out there? Phos Astos is lost," Conor said. "If this many attackers are at the edge where we are, there's no way the Sadreans will hold out at the center. Our dying here won't help anything."

Meilin's mouth pressed into a scowl. She'd seen war. She'd once witnessed her own city fall to invaders, and had been forced to flee and become a refugee from her home.

This was worse. It wasn't occupation; it was annihilation. This strange and wonderful place—this city of light—was about to blink out forever. And there was nothing she could do about it. Her eyes stung with frustration. How had she come to be here? She'd left Greenhaven to help the world *rebuild*. And now she was only witnessing destruction.

"It's thirty feet down to the next ledge," Meilin said brusquely, wiping her tears away before Conor could see them. "If we jump, we break our legs. We have to scale down the rock face."

Conor shook his head. "Kovo managed it, but only just. And he's an *ape*. I don't think we'd have a chance of making it down."

Meilin peered over the edge again, thinking. She nodded. "I have a plan. Don't ask what it is, just watch."

“What is—” Conor asked, then stopped with a sheepish look.

Meilin stepped back from the lip, calling Jhi into passive state as she did. Again, she felt the wrenching pain of her frayed bond whipping through her core. She let one of the Many climb all the way onto the ledge. The moment it was on its feet, it rushed Meilin, yellow fingernails outstretched and mouth bared. The spiral on its forehead throbbed and twisted as Meilin reared her staff back. But rather than strike the monster with its length, she thrust with its tip. The pole struck the creature in its chest and sent it flying backward.

Meilin followed after, pole-vaulting over the edge with the tumbling monster. She kicked out with both her feet so they hit its chest, and then she was surfing on the tumbling body. The creature’s back worked like a kite in the open air, slowing Meilin’s descent. When it struck the ledge, she rolled free.

She’d have to leave it to trust that Conor was following the same plan, as the moment she hit the lower ledge Meilin was surrounded by the gnashing teeth and claws of the Many. She managed to get her staff out in time to cuff the chin of a ghastly monster who was about to sink its teeth into her shoulder. It reeled, bowling over two of its companions.

“Takoda!” Meilin called.

Takoda didn’t react; he had enough to worry about, struggling to keep himself on Kovo’s shoulders as the gorilla pivoted and swung his meaty arms. Kovo’s technique was still working, keeping a circle of stone floor clear around him, but even he was tiring.

As she battled, Meilin heard Conor drop to the ledge beside her, followed by a popping sound as Briggan reappeared. She wished she could summon Jhi, but the ledge was too narrow for all their spirit animals.

“This horde won’t end. We need to drop down as soon as we have an opening!” Meilin cried.

Kovo didn’t respond—he just stepped quickly to the edge and dropped over into the darkness, taking a surprised and shrieking Takoda with him.

Meilin and Conor ran up to the lip of the ledge and, after peeking over and seeing there was only a few yards’ drop, stepped over.

As she landed, Phos Astos came into view. The sight was enough to confirm that the last city of Sadre was definitely lost. The scrambling forms of the Many riddled the giant mushrooms like parasites, attacking whoever

they could find. Their pale bodies shone in the pink-green light. More streamed down in the updraft, a torrent of slavering ghouls that cascaded into the city like an unholy waterfall.

The sight of the devastation took Meilin's breath away, but Conor was instantly on his feet, running toward the tunnel that led out of the city. Without losing any momentum, he whipped out his ax just in time to take down one of the Many that came too close. Meilin fell into a sprint, right behind Briggan.

Conor veered to one side, and Meilin realized what he was heading for. At the base of the last mushroom before the cavern wall, Xanthe and Ingailor were locked in combat against a gibbering throng of enemies.

Back to back, they had bright crystal maces in their hands and were wielding the glowing rocks like dual swords; wherever the shining weapons went, the Many recoiled. Their slices and parries left broad arcs of light in the air. But their enemies were increasing in number, and as they did, they grew more aggressive. The tunnel to the slate plain was soon blocked by a horde of creatures.

There was a rush of black at the edge of Meilin's vision as Kovo charged past, his meaty hands and feet impacting the ground with great rumbling thuds that sent tremors through her gut. The gorilla furiously set upon the Many, pounding them from above. Takoda still clung desperately to his back.

Scrambling after him, Meilin watched helplessly as Xanthe lost her footing and tumbled before the pressing mass of the Many. For an anguished moment she disappeared entirely from view. Then the girl reappeared, struggling against one of the Many who had her scalp in its grasp. It yanked her head back to expose her slender, pale neck.

"No!" Meilin cried out. But she was too far away to save her new friend.

Ingailor, however, was not. He threw himself onto the monster, ripping it from Xanthe. But the beast twisted in his grasp, and in the space of one horrifying split-second it had sunk its yellow teeth into his neck. Another took advantage of the opening to pounce, landing on Ingailor's shoulders. The Sadrean elder fell into the horde and did not come back up.

For a horrified second, Xanthe stared at the space where the elder had fallen, her face frozen in utter shock. A monster leaped from the side, long-nailed fingers ready to swipe.

By then, Kovo and Takoda had arrived. The ape pummeled the creatures approaching Xanthe while Takoda reached down from his vantage point on Kovo's back. He grabbed the back of Xanthe's shift and hauled her up in front of him. Meilin streaked to their side and heard Takoda yell to Xanthe: "Where should we go?"

But the girl was in shock. Her mouth was slack as she stared at the space where Ingailor had so recently stood, now crawling with monsters. It was all she could do to hold on to Takoda's arms.

"Head for the exit tunnel!" Meilin yelled while she fended off another attacker. A low roundhouse sent him staggering to the ground. "There's no other option!"

Fatigued and struggling under the weight of two riders, Kovo tottered and nearly fell. But he righted himself and lurched toward the tunnel.

Xanthe managed to find the wits to hold her crystal mace in front of Kovo's forehead. The glow helped keep their enemies at bay. Conor and Briggan tucked themselves into the open space behind Kovo, and Meilin took up the rear, swiping her quarterstaff at any enemies that got too close.

Though she couldn't risk turning her head to see where they were going, Meilin felt the ground slope slightly, and then cool, dank air washed over her flushed cheeks. The glowing lights of Phos Astos narrowed to an oval, then a point as they fought their way deep into the exit tunnel.

Jabbering with fury, the Many pressed after them, but Meilin could no longer be flanked in the narrow confines. She went on the offensive, bludgeoning any creature that came near. While she fought off their enemies, she heard Xanthe's voice from somewhere behind her: "There's a secret rope here. There, tucked into the crevice!"

Then she heard two rapid pops as Kovo and Briggan disappeared. Someone was climbing nearby. She saw a braided rope enter her vision, even as she sliced her staff at an attacker. "You'll be the last one up," Conor called after her. "As soon as there's an opening, climb this."

She heard the rope creak as the others ascended behind her. Then she made a final stand, knocking one attacker into the next hard enough that the two bowled down the one behind. Meilin used the opportunity to grope in the darkness for ... the rope! She caught the knotted cable and scrambled upward, her arms burning with exhaustion. Once she'd gone a ways up, she felt a

familiar grip on her shoulders as Conor helped her the rest of the way.

Meilin lay on the tunnel floor, panting, while Conor pulled the rope back up. Then he collapsed next to her. Takoda lay in a similar state of exhaustion on her other side. Meilin turned her head in time to see his tattoo quiver and then disappear. Kovo appeared, sitting on the stone floor. She summoned Jhi, and Conor did the same with Briggan.

Xanthe had huddled herself against the wall, her head pressed tight against her knees. Jhi ambled over and sat by her side, resting her soft, furry back against Xanthe's. The panda always knew who was in the most need.

For a long moment, all they did was catch their breath in the darkness.

As soon as she could, Meilin sat up and faced Xanthe. She lay a hand on the Sadrean girl's elbow. "Xanthe? Are you okay?"

Xanthe tried to nod, but she was shaking too violently. She jerked back and pressed against the rock wall, away from Meilin and Jhi.

"Are we safe for now?" Meilin asked.

Xanthe nodded again, though the words that tumbled out of her mouth were: "Phos Astos is gone."

"I'm sorry about Ingailor," Conor said.

She glared at him. "They're *all* dead," she snapped. "Not just him. My family! All of them! Dead because of those mindless monsters!"

Conor shrank away, his face blanching even in the shadows.

Takoda knelt beside Xanthe, and to Meilin's surprise he took her trembling frame fully in his arms. "I know," the boy said. "You must be in so much pain. I'm sorry." His face was full of both yearning sadness and affection.

Kovo slowly turned so he could no longer see Takoda and Xanthe. His scarlet eyes clouded, and his face twisted with something Meilin was slow to recognize. Kovo looked ... jealous. It was an emotion she'd never have expected in the gorilla.

It seemed like Kovo had surprised himself, too. He breathed heavily for a moment, then sat back on his haunches and very deliberately closed his eyes, hands balled into tight fists at his side.

"Xanthe," Meilin said, "we may be safe in this tunnel for now, but I can't imagine we will be for long. I can hear the Many congregating down there."

"Give her a second!" Takoda snapped.

Meilin recoiled, stung.

Xanthe pulled out of Takoda's embrace. "No, Meilin is right. We need to get moving."

"The question is where," Conor said.

"No, *that* is not a question," Xanthe said. Her face was as white as bone, leached of even its faint color.

"What do you mean?"

"This tunnel goes south, but it branches soon," Xanthe said. "There are indeed decisions to be made, but there's no question of our eventual destination. Our last city is destroyed. My family ... We cannot let that be in vain."

"The Evertree," Meilin said. "We have to go to the Evertree."

"Yes," Xanthe said. She determinedly wiped her tears away. "Look." She pointed to the ceiling of the tunnel. Wide cracks lined it, and within each was the skinny tendril of a root.

"That couldn't possibly be ..." Meilin said. "The Evertree is miles away."

"The roots of the Evertree are far wider than the tree itself," said Xanthe. "The Evertree *is* Erdas, and we are it. But these roots, too, are dwindling. Even a few days ago, they filled these crevices. But now they have shrunken—the tree has retracted them, because it's sick."

"We must cure it," Meilin said.

"Then we'll need to destroy the Wyrms," Xanthe said. "The Wyrms is where the parasites are emerging from. The Wyrms is the scourge sickening the Evertree. If the tree dies, the bonds between humans and spirit animals will disappear entirely—and worse."

"Look!" Conor said. "The root!"

In front of Meilin's eyes, the root lining the ceiling began to quiver, echoed by an aching throb in Meilin's spine. Then the quivering intensified, as did the throb. "Oh no, oh no—" Meilin said.

Then it happened. Like the blast of a horn right in her ear, pain ripped through her, obliterating every other sensation. She buckled under it, and saw through the flashing agony that Takoda and Conor were experiencing the same torment.

She screamed and curled into a fetal position on the floor. Around her she heard, not just the cries of her friends, but sharp whimpers from Jhi, whining

howls from Briggan, and anguished grunts from Kovo. Then, slowly, the pain around Meilin's spine released. She sat up, drenched in sweat, and looked around her. Briggan's and Jhi's eyes were rimmed in fearful white, and Kovo's face was scrunched down at the pain he'd been through.

"What just happened to you all?" Xanthe asked quietly.

Meilin looked into Jhi's eyes, and it was like staring at a stranger. "Our spirit animal bonds just ... frayed," Meilin panted. "That's the only way I can describe it."

"And look," Xanthe said, pointing at the crevices in the ceiling. "The Evertree's roots retracted as the pain came."

Meilin heard Kovo snort, then turned to see him sitting before Takoda, signing. The ape made a rumbling sound of complaint.

"Kovo says he's noticed it, too," Takoda said. "He can't sense my thoughts the way he used to."

"I'd call that a good thing," Conor said, looking suspiciously at the ape. He stood with a grunt and lit a torch. The scant light of the tunnel became a full blaze.

Meilin risked a look at Kovo. She found he was already watching her, his scarlet eyes gleaming with furious intensity. It was hard to know what he was thinking, but one thing was unmistakable: Kovo was under no one's control. He knew more than any of them about what was happening, and they were all at his mercy.

With a gruff snort, Kovo turned and headed down the tunnel. Toward Nilo. Toward the Wyrn.



AMBUSH

ROLLAN TUMBLED IN THE DIM LIGHT OF DAWN. HE landed on his hands and knees and screamed as he struggled to escape his mysterious attacker. Essix relied on vision, not smell, so in the dim light she must have been caught as unawares as Rollan. He heard a rush of wind and a surprised shriek as the falcon swooped to his side. As soon as she landed, Essix was back in the air again. Another raptor screamed, and the vise-like clamp on the back of Rollan's thigh eased.

He freed himself and whirled in confusion—the sounds of his foes were coming from all directions. Though the mountains still blocked the dawn, a few scraps of light had iced the dewy grasses only a few yards away. That's where Rollan staggered, knowing he and his friends would have a better chance of defending themselves if they could see who they were fighting.

Along the way he stumbled into Abeke. She nodded in the direction he was moving, and wordlessly followed. Anda and Tellun were at their side by the time Rollan got to the open grassland.

A handsome bearded man emerged from the darkness, clad in a black tunic. Even in the predawn light, Rollan could see that there was a spiral on his forehead, where the strange creature writhed beneath the skin.

"Hello, Rollan and Abeke," the man said calmly. "It has been some time. Can't say I've missed you."

"Zerif!" Abeke said, her bow in hand. "What happened to you?"

"Something *wonderful*," Zerif answered. "Though far beyond your understanding. The Wyrms awaken, and I awaken with it."

Rollan noted that the man still carried his oily charm, but Conor had been right: Something was off about Zerif. His eyes were a bit too wild. His smile was a bit too stretched.

“And this must be the boy who has summoned Tellun,” Zerif continued, turning to Anda. “What is about to happen to you can either be painful or mercifully quick. The amount you will suffer is your choice, but the outcome is not. Tellun will be mine.”

In response, Tellun bowed his noble head—not in deference, but in preparation to charge. He raised one hoof and pressed it to the earth, like a runner taking his mark. But then he paused.

Something emerged from the shadows behind Zerif.

It was a large serpent, as thick as a tree trunk, with a broad, triangular head. Her wide, slitted eyes had a manic tilt to them, and as she came into the full light she reared back and opened her black hood. Fear filled Rollan’s mouth with a foul, bitter taste, and his skin felt like rubber. He’d met this cobra before, during the war. Of all the opponents they’d faced, cruel Gerathon was the one who most often stalked his dreams.

“Gerathon,” Abeke said bitterly. “*You’ve* bowed to this fool?”

Abeke knew what she was doing: Gerathon had always been a haughty, stubborn creature, with a definite bent for killing humans. It might work to pit her pride against Zerif. But the cobra’s triangular face remained impassive as she turned her merciless gaze on them. Rollan knew from experience that, although they were a dozen feet away, they were still within striking range of the cobra’s fangs.

Rollan had his dagger out, ready to dodge and counterattack, but Essix chirped to stop him.

Tellun stepped forward, approaching the serpent. Rollan’s heart was in his mouth as he watched the elk stride calmly in front of the coiled snake and go perfectly still, head lowered.

Staring right into Gerathon’s slitted eyes, Tellun worked his way closer. Though information seemed to pass between the beasts, Tellun apparently didn’t get the response he’d expected. Gerathon lunged, hissing, and the elk sprang to one side, all four legs tucking under him in the air.

Beside Gerathon, another form emerged from the darkness—an eagle, slightly larger and stockier than Essix, with a sharp and noble prow.

A new fear pricked at Rollan's neck as Halawir looked hungrily at Essix. The falcon would be in for the fight of her life if it came to aerial combat. "Stay near," he whispered to her.

Rollan heard Abeke's bow creak, and knew she was readying for battle. "I don't know what your plan is," Abeke called to Zerif, "but you won't have Tellun as part of it."

"Are you so sure?" Zerif spat. "He'll have no say in the matter."

"Prepare," Abeke told Rollan and Anda through the side of her mouth.

Gone were the days of allowing Zerif to call the first shot; Abeke gave no warning before letting her arrow fly. He dodged to one side just in time, and the arrow thudded into something beyond the edge of the dawn's light—something that trumpeted in anger. The ground rumbled as the furious beast surged forward. It was Dinesh, the mighty elephant thudding into the crisp light, rage in his eyes and a comparatively puny arrow shaft sticking out of his flank.

Trembling, Anda took an involuntary step backward. "We have to run!" he whispered. "We have no chance against them."

Fear had the opposite effect on Abeke; she gave a battle cry and summoned Uraza. Instantly, the powerful cat was twining itself around her feet, growling as she prepared for the fight.

But then Zerif ripped open the front of his tunic, revealing three more tattoos riding the muscles of his chest—a boar, a ram, and a polar bear. One by one the tattoos flashed and disappeared, until three more Great Beasts stood before them: Rumfuss the Boar, with his wide, flat head and pointed shredding tusks, chilly hatred in his expression; Arax the Ram, all wiry hair and bounding energy, bitter anger flashing in his eyes; and Suka the Polar Bear, the largest of them all, with pure white fur. The polar bear's black lips pulled back to reveal a row of powerful teeth.

As one, the beasts leveled their hostile gazes on the companions. Zerif had them all under his command; there was no doubting it.

"Anda, run!" Rollan ordered. "We'll hold them off as long as we can!"

Essix launched herself at Zerif, but Halawir unfurled his great wings and sprang to meet the falcon. He hooked his sharp beak around one of Essix's talons, and the two crashed together in the air, tumbling, beaks snapping and clawed feet gouging. They flew higher as they went, shreds of feathers

floating down.

Though Rollan was desperate to keep his eyes on Essix, he had plenty to worry about on the ground. With Arax, Rumfuss, and Suka at his side, Zerif charged Tellun. Arax pulled ahead first, brow lowered to the horizon line so his great curving horns were parallel to the ground.

But Tellun held his ground, four legs planted deep in the earth, antlers lowered in defense. They looked spindly compared to Arax's densely curled horns.

Anda had started to flee, but when it was clear Tellun was making a stand, he reversed course and raced to his side. He was still yards away when the two Great Beasts made impact. With a horrifying crunch of breaking bones, they went down in a cloud of geysering dirt.

When the dust cleared, Rollan saw Tellun staggering to his feet. A fragment of antler was on the ground, but the elk was otherwise unharmed. Apparently those antlers weren't as spindly as Rollan had thought.

Arax was splayed out on his side but soon leaped back up, preparing to charge again.

Now it was Rumfuss's turn to attack. His short legs didn't allow him to get nearly the momentum Arax had, but he scissored his tusked head from side to side as he went, ready to slice anything that got in his path. The impact with Arax had spun Tellun sideways, and the boar would soon catch him broadside. When Rumfuss hit, Tellun would be gored.

If not for Uraza. The leopard had been silently circling the field since the attack began, and launched herself with the speed of one of Abeke's arrows, hurtling through the air to strike Rumfuss's flank. Her claws sank into the boar's tough hide. They did little damage but held like burrs, and Uraza's weight fishtailed Rumfuss to one side, crashing leopard and boar into the dirt. When Gerathon streaked toward the pair, Abeke loosed an arrow that embedded into the snake's tail. Gerathon hissed, hesitating long enough for Uraza to scramble to her feet and make a desperate leap to the side. Gerathon's fangs sank into the dirt where Uraza had been only moments before. Another arrow and the serpent was pinned at the hood, flailing as she tried to extract herself from the rocky soil.

That still left a man, an elephant, and a polar bear for the others to contend with, with Arax preparing to rejoin the attack. While Tellun settled

into a defensive stance, Rollan took up a position next to Abeke, with Anda behind him.

“Let’s do this,” Rollan said grimly.

Abeke nodded resolutely.

“I’m afraid I’m not much help as a warrior,” Anda said.

“Don’t apologize,” Abeke said sharply. “Just fight as you can!”

Anda cast a glance to Tellun, and Rollan was surprised to see a lack of fear on the boy’s face, though surely he had to be aware of the hopelessness of their fight.

Dinesh led the charge. As the massive, trumpeting animal bore down on them, Rollan knew they had only two options: Get out of the way or die.

The companions’ hasty defensive line scattered as they tumbled to either side. Even Tellun didn’t dare stand up to the massive beast. He leaped directly away from Dinesh, looking over his shoulder to make sure the elephant gave chase. Only the elk could hope to match Dinesh once he got up to speed. The fleet leader of the Great Beasts was soon leading Dinesh away from the companions. Rollan could hear the crash and clatter of the life-or-death chase as they hurtled away.

A few yards off, Uraza was facing the impossible task of simultaneously holding off Rumfuss and Arax. While her assailants circled and lunged, Uraza growled and dodged, making harassing jabs with her claws as she tried to keep the beasts distracted and buy them all time. Somewhere in the sky above, Essix’s shrieks matched Halawir’s screeches as more broken feathers glided down to the earth.

Meanwhile, arms crossed over his chest, Zerif calmly took in Rollan, Abeke, and Anda where they lay sprawled in the dirt. “I will claim three Great Beasts today. My job is nearly done.”

“You will not have Uraza!” Abeke said, spitting blood as she got to her feet and dusted herself off. With the leopard present, she was even more agile than usual, regaining her feet in one springing motion. “I’d bring her back into tattoo form long before you could take her.”

“Sadly, you’re right,” Zerif said, leaning nonchalantly against Suka’s flank. The possessed polar bear didn’t even seem to notice the man next to her, her smoldering eyes fixed on the fleeing elk. “I’ll have to kill you first. Though I wonder if Tellun has the same protection.” His eyes fell on Anda.

“Tell me, plainsboy, you only just summoned the Great Elk. Have you mastered *his* dormant state?”

Anda didn't answer, but his wide, fearful eyes confirmed plenty.

Zerif's mouth split into an oily grin. “So much of my life lately has been about good timing.”

Rollan readied his dagger, clenching his sweaty fingers over its leather grip as he kept his eyes on Suka. Powerful and agile—even a normal polar bear was nothing Rollan and Abeke could contend with without the aid of their spirit animals ... and Uraza and Essix had their own life-or-death battles. Favoring his good leg, Rollan edged closer to Anda.

“Suka,” Zerif commanded, “kill the plainsboy first.”

Suka bared her sharp yellow teeth and took off toward Anda, starting slow and lumbering but soon at lethal speed. The boy scrambled backward and tumbled, grinding his body through the dirt in his haste to get away. Abeke loosed an arrow at the bear, but cursed as it did nothing to slow her. She readied another, but she would have no time to shoot before Suka reached Anda. Rollan threw himself forward and tried to slash at the bear with his dagger, but the blade was slowed by her thick pelt and only barely nicked Suka's skin. The polar bear continued unimpeded.

With one great swipe of her claw, the boy was lying prone on the ground. With another swipe, his body tumbled and rolled and came to rest beside a tree.

Abeke got another arrow off, and this one made contact, hitting Suka in the flank. The polar bear roared in pain. But it was too little, too late. Suka laid one strong paw on Anda's chest where he lay still and opened her massive jaw to finish him off.

Anda's life would have ended right then—if it hadn't been for Tellun. Tree branches snapped sharply as the elk burst over a rise, head bowed, heading straight for the polar bear who had dared harm his boy. Caught by surprise, Suka took Tellun's antlers hard in the flank and fell over, rolling in the dirt.

Tellun stood over the moaning Anda, antlers lowered protectively. The elk was bleeding from many places, including one particularly nasty wound on his backside that must have come from Dinesh's tusks. Rollan noticed that Dinesh had not followed Tellun and felt a glimmer of hope: Could it be that

Tellun had actually defeated him?

Zerif had taken advantage of the distraction to creep up undetected. Tellun was facing Suka, ribs shuddering with exhaustion, foamy spittle dripping from his mouth. Abeke worked busily to get a third arrow notched. With his wounded leg, Rollan was too far from the fight to reach them in time. “Watch out, Tellun!” he cried.

Zerif was upon the elk before Tellun could whirl to face him. That moment of advantage was all he needed. With vision sharpened by his affinity with Essix, Rollan watched Zerif unstopper a vial and splash something gray and squirming right onto the elk’s gashed cheek.

For a moment, the leader of the Great Beasts was frozen in shock. Then he frantically slashed his head from side to side, trying to get the creature off. It continued to wriggle up his head, though, and as it did Tellun seemed to realize what was happening. He looked down at Anda, sorrow joining bewilderment on the elk’s face.

“No!” Anda cried. The boy managed to raise himself to his forearms just in time to watch Tellun’s expression change to anguished horror as the creature disappeared under his skin. The elk’s eyes went milky, then bright.

He turned coldly away from Anda and stood at attention, ready for orders. From Zerif.

“Tellun?” Anda called, eyes wet with tears.

“Slay the boy,” Zerif commanded.

Without even a moment of hesitation, Tellun lowered his head, preparing to charge in with his sharp antlers.

Rollan peered around in desperation. Essix was locked in combat with Halawir, and Uraza was still busy with Arax and Rulfuss, breathing heavily with exhaustion. Anda lay motionless on the ground, paralyzed by shock.

It seemed hopeless.

Until he heard a whizzing sound, right over his shoulder, as a spear appeared in Tellun’s leg.

Rollan watched in astonishment as the elk fell. It wasn’t a mortal wound, but it was crippling; the elk struggled and failed to get up, neck muscles standing out as he thrashed and struggled. Tellun was out of commission.

Some of the hunters from Anda’s tribe must have followed them! Rollan whirled, hoping to see Anda’s parents had come up behind them.

Instead, striding out of the dawn mists, was a stranger.

Friend or foe, child or adult, it was hard to tell anything, as the mysterious figure wore a long, stiff crimson cloak. Even if there hadn't been a hood hanging low over his head, a curious mask—a single white plate, like one huge scale of a reptile—covered his features. The stranger strode forward fearlessly, the fingers of one leather-gloved hand flexing and unflexing.

“Stop right there!” Zerif called.

Tellun was baying in agony from the spear. Rollan had never heard such a terrible noise.

The red figure continued striding forward. Though the movement looked effortless, the stranger approached at the speed of a sprint and was soon upon them. To Rollan's shock, he went straight for Suka. The polar bear opened her jaws to strike, but the stranger was too quick. His run turned into a dropkick, and the heel of his boot smacked Suka full in the face. Already weakened, the enormous bear groaned and tumbled to one side, unconscious.

Rollan and Zerif both were frozen in shock at the stranger's amazing strength. Abeke took the opportunity to loose her third arrow, this one right at Zerif. It struck the man in the abdomen, and he doubled over. For a moment he looked at the shaft in astonishment, as if surprised to find himself vulnerable after all. Then—his eyes full of a maniac's zeal—he yanked the arrow back out and threw it to one side, drawing himself back up to his full height.

Abeke's next arrow went to Rumfuss, striking his shoulder. When the boar looked up in surprise, Uraza swiped him in the face. Having freed herself from the arrow, Gerathon arrived and was soon coiled and making feinting strikes with her hooded fangs. Bleeding from the leopard's gashes, Rumfuss returned his attention to Uraza.

Arax was unwatched.

Abeke's desperate shot had left her open to attack. Arax lowered his head and charged. Though Rollan shouted for his friend's attention, it was too late—there was no way Abeke would be able to leap away in time. Once Arax's horns hit her at this speed, death would be instant.

But with one long stride, the red-cloaked stranger was in front of Abeke. As Arax neared, the figure simply held out its hands. Rollan gasped when he realized the stranger meant to *catch* the ram's horns.

With a giant thunderclap of sound, a cloud of soil and rock erupted into the air, like an explosion had gone off beneath the earth. When the cloud settled, Rollan strained his eyes through the dust to see what had happened.

The figure was still on his feet.

But Arax was not.

With superhuman strength, the stranger pressed Arax's horns deeper and deeper into the ground. The ram struggled but was wrenched hard into the soil, neck bending, his possessed eyes now full of fright. Rollan found himself swelling with unexpected pity for the once Great Beast.

Above, Rollan heard Essix shrieking. She wouldn't be able to keep Halawir at bay for much longer. Rumfuss, too, was up and ready to attack again.

"Zerif!" Rollan cried, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. "Suka and Arax have fallen, and Dinesh has disappeared. Surrender!"

Zerif narrowed his eyes and flicked them to the figure in red. Rollan watched as furious calculations passed behind Zerif's eyes. Finally, the man in black nodded, a scowl twisting his mouth. "You might keep Uraza and Essix today, but I have what I came for. Tellun is mine!"

Zerif parted the rent fabric of his tunic farther, and with a flash and a popping sound, Suka and then Arax disappeared, right under the hands of the masked stranger. Zerif must have called Dinesh from wherever he was trapped, too. All three appeared as tattoos on his chest.

Finally, without a second look at Anda, Tellun himself vanished and appeared as a tattoo crossing Zerif's ribs and up under his arm, his antlers just gracing the hollows of Zerif's collarbone. Anda got one dazed look at the elk emblazoned on the body of his enemy and finally passed out, his eyes rolling white before his head hit the earth.

Zerif kept Rumfuss, Halawir, and Gerathon in active form. The beasts flocked to his side, ready to press the attack.

Abeke soon had another arrow notched and pointed at Zerif's heart. Zerif put one hand out to still her. "Your plainsboy friend will die unless you bandage his wounds now. If you shoot, we will attack."

Abeke's fingers on the arrow shook with tension for a moment, but then she wearily nodded and lowered her bow.

While Zerif headed off toward the forest line, his beasts tailing after him,

Uraza and Essix returned to Anda's side.

Once their enemies were out of sight, Abeke dropped her bow and ran to the boy.

Rollan, though, went to the red-cloaked figure. "Thank you for your help," he said warily.

The figure didn't respond, just stood perfectly still, arms folded. Then the shining white mask nodded, catching gleams of the dawn's light.

"What's your name?" Rollan asked.

With one hand, the figure pointed to Anda. The meaning was clear: *Go help your friend.*

Then the red-cloaked stranger took off into the trees, following Zerif. As he went, he recovered his spear from the ground where Suka had disappeared. He inspected the tip, then hefted it, preparing to throw again. Apparently the battle wasn't over for everyone.

Rollan rushed to Anda's side. Abeke was busy dabbing at Anda's face with his own shirt, which she had ripped free to use as a bandage. "He's bleeding a lot. We need to get him to the ship quickly. If we move fast, I think that he'll live."

"His tribe trusted him to us ..." Rollan said grimly. He squeezed his eyes shut as the full scope of their failure came into focus. He took a ragged breath. "I'll make a stretcher."

As he ran to a nearby fallen tree to strip branches, Rollan's mind raced. Why was Zerif stealing the Great Beasts? How did this gray parasite take over its host, and where did it come from? And who was that masked red figure who had clearly been tailing them as well?

Zerif had mentioned a name when he attacked—the Wyrms. He'd said it was awakening. What did that mean?

While Rollan hacked at branches to start making a stretcher, the question that loomed largest in his mind was also the saddest. How would Anda react when he woke up? Tellun, the greatest of the Great Beasts, the noble elk who'd become his closest companion, had been taken from him.

Though it was heartbreaking to imagine, Rollan sensed that Tellun wasn't all that would be taken from them in the days to come. Not by far.

Eliot Schrefer is the two-time National Book Award Finalist author of *Endangered* and *Threatened*, jungle survival stories about apes. His research for his Great Ape Quartet books has brought him to a bonobo orphanage in Congo and on a boat trek through the waterways of Borneo. *Immortal Guardians* is the second book he's written for the Spirit Animals series.

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BROKEN GROUND

Split between two worlds, the team races to stop an ancient evil. Below, Conor and Meilin must cross a vast spiderweb, while above, Rollan and Abeke journey to Stetriol—the kingdom that nearly destroyed Erdas.

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A sneak peek of the next



Book Two

Broken Ground

By Victoria Schwab



SHADOWS IN STETRIOL

Clouds raked across the sky, blotting out the moon and stars.

It was not a night for looking up.

If it had been, someone in Stetriol might have seen the shadows slipping over the rooftops, the shapes perched like gargoyles atop the walls. Someone might have seen the young man standing at the peak of a roof like a weathervane, his face hidden behind a pale, horned mask, his dark cloak snapping in the breeze. But all eyes were down, focused on books and hearths, meals and fires and drinks, and no one noticed.

The figure straightened and began to walk lithely along the spines of the shingled roofs, the cloak billowing behind him. In the color-stripped night, the cloak looked black, but when he paused and the lamplight flickered up from the roads and courtyards below and caught the fabric, it shone *red*.

All around him, Stetriol was alive in a way it hadn't been in ages. The city had a pulse again, and it was beating, beating, beating in time with his heart, his steps.

The streets fell away below him as he moved with animal grace over the tops of shops and houses until he found the one he was looking for. He paused against a chimney, then sank into a crouch, the horns of his mask catching the light before vanishing with the rest of him into shadow.

In a courtyard below, a girl sat on the rim of a fountain, her long white-blond hair twisted up around her head like a crown. Her legs swished absently in the shallow pool, where a large swan drifted, its feathers as white as sunlight on snow. Behind the horned mask, the young man's eyes—not

human eyes, but slitted sideways, like a ram's—widened at the sight of the animal, and he leaned forward at an almost impossible angle, entranced as the swan slid gracefully over the water's surface.

So the rumors were true.

Ninani had come to Stetriol.

The girl's hair and the swan's feathers made twin pools of pale white light against the muted greens and blues and shadow grays of the courtyard. The girl had a book open and was reading aloud to the swan, her voice soft and sweet, the words lost beneath the gentle swish of the water around her legs.

Back on the rooftop, a flash of movement caught the man's eyes; another cloaked figure appeared on the opposite wall of the courtyard, only the snout of a coyote mask visible against the slated roof. *Howl*. The canine figure shifted his weight; on the ground, he was unstoppable, but he'd never been comfortable with heights.

Howl, the first signed in greeting.

Stead, the second signed back.

A third cloaked shadow sprang out of the darkness to *Howl*'s right, a feline smile carved into the mask that hid her face, her movements so smooth he hadn't even noticed her approach.

Shadow.

The girl signed a dismissive hello, then sank into a crouch and steadied herself on the roof, her nails glinting, curved and sharp as a cat's.

The three perched like stone statues above the courtyard, surrounding the girl and her spirit animal as she read on, unaware of their presence. *Howl* shifted his footing a second time.

What now? signed *Shadow*, her fingers dancing lazily through the air.

The young man in the horned mask—*Stead*, they called him—squinted, and then signed his command. *Send word to King*.

Shadow drew a finger around her head in answer. The sign for horns was the same as the one for crown. They had wanted to call him that. *Crown*. He was, after all, King's second-in-command. But the gesture made *Stead* uncomfortable—his loyalty to their leader was absolute, unflinching—so he'd opted for *Stead*. As in *steadfast* or *steady-on-your-feet*.

He waved *Shadow*'s tease away.

Below, the girl trailed off and went to turn the page when the book slipped

from her hand. She fumbled with it, but it fell, bounced off her knee, and landed with a splash in the fountain.

The swan bristled, fluttering her wings.

“Oops,” whispered the girl, dragging the sodden book out of the water. She held it up by one corner, and sighed as water dripped from the pages. “Don’t tell Father.”

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Mortar pebbles skittered down the roof and over the edge, as soft as rain.

The cloaked figures held their breath.

Below, the swan stilled in her pool.

The girl looked up, but it was dark above the lanterns. “What was that?” she asked softly. She and the swan both craned their necks. The girl squinted, as if she could *almost* see the outline of a figure, the edge of a mask.

“Tasha!” called a voice from within the house. The girl’s attention wavered, drifted back down to the fountain and the house behind her.

“Must have been a bird,” said the girl. “Or a mouse. Or the wind.” She swung her legs out of the water, and then trailed her fingers through its glassy surface.

“Come on, Ninani,” she said pleasantly.

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“Idiot,” she hissed aloud.

“We weren’t all meant for scaling buildings,” he growled in return.

“Enough,” ordered Stead, his voice low and even. Howl and Shadow both drew breath, as if about to go on, when Stead’s hand shot up in warning.

A sound, like the shuffle of bare feet on stone.

An instant later Tasha hurried back out into the courtyard to retrieve the book she’d left on the fountain’s edge. Halfway there, she caught her foot on a mat, and nearly stumbled before righting herself and taking up the sodden book. She pressed the covers together to squeeze out the last of the water and turned back toward the house.

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They knew where she was now.

Where *Ninani* was.

And they would be back.

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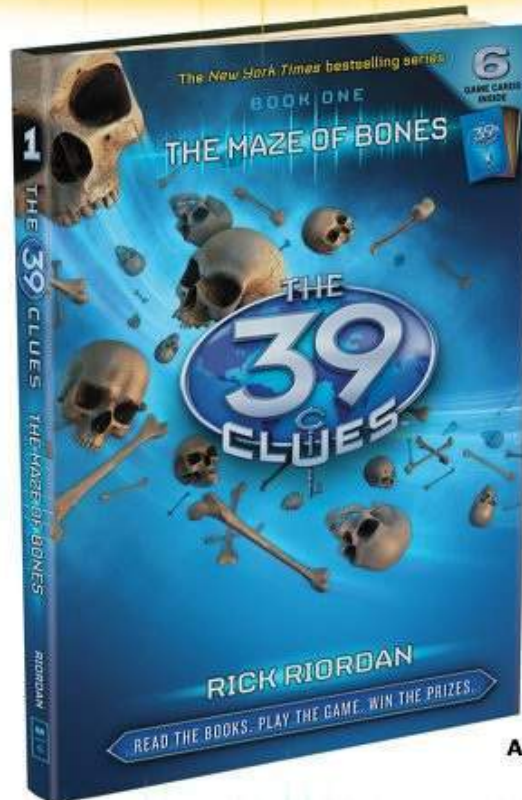
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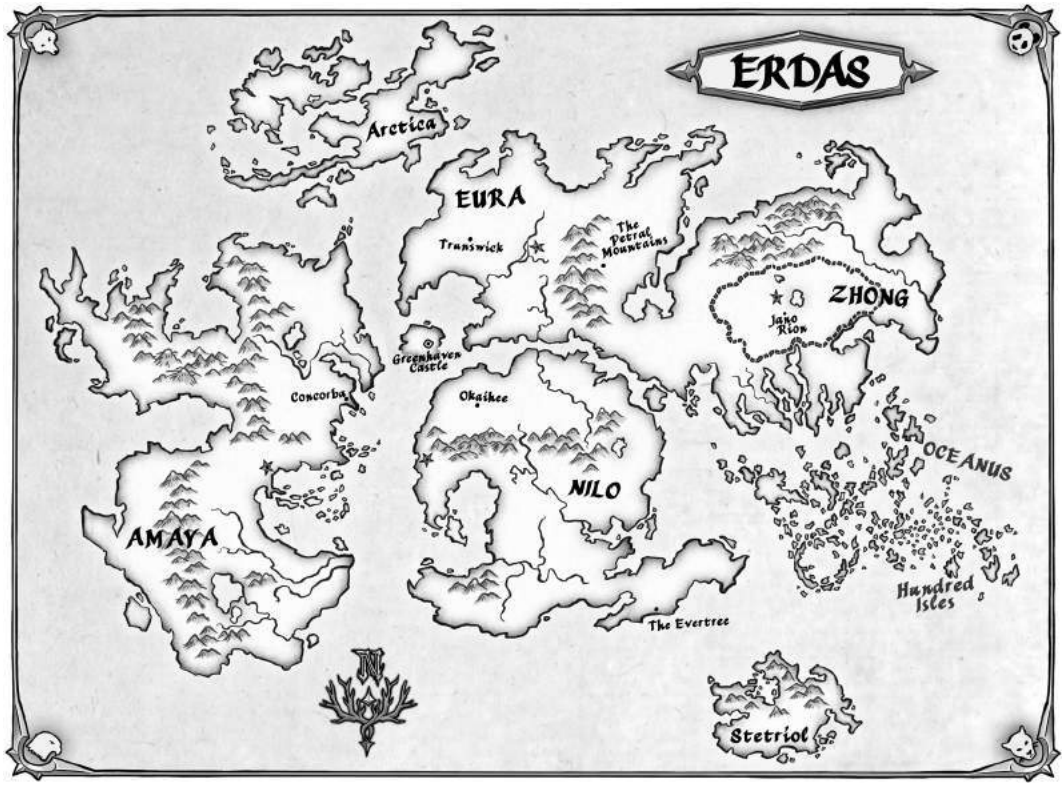
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Victoria Schwab



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SHADOWS IN STETRIOL

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Where *Ninani* was.

And they would be back.

With that, Stead slipped away and followed the others into shadow and night.



EYES IN THE DARK

THE TORCHLIGHT MADE THEIR SHADOWS DANCE.

They walked through the tunnels below the world, casting a train of eerie silhouettes, all stretched out and flickering against the cave walls. Conor tried to focus on the people instead of their monstrous shadows, but he couldn't stop his eyes from wandering to the rock walls, where their distorted versions twisted and hovered. Meilin, Takoda, and Xanthe were nothing but spindly forms. Briggan's shadow was low, all ears and tail.

But it was Kovo's that disturbed him most.

The ape's shadow stretched and loomed, towering over the others with its teeth bared. In the haunting, unsteady light, Conor thought he could even see the beast's red eyes glowing impossibly in the shadow's warping face.

Conor swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to separate what was real from what was fever and fatigue. More and more, the two blurred together in his sight. The edges weren't sharp, and if he didn't focus, the nightmares could slip so easily out of his dreams and into the darkened tunnels around them.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" asked Meilin—the *real* Meilin, not shadow but flesh and blood and stern resolve—from the path ahead. She was gripping the torchlight, angling its beam from the pale pink eyes of the other girl, the one who was leading the group through the underground maze.

"I'm sure," said Xanthe.

“How can you be sure?” muttered Meilin. “Everything looks the same ...”

“Maybe to you,” said Xanthe simply, running a delicate hand along the wall.

But it looked the same to Conor, too. Now and then he could feel the ground beneath them slope slightly downward, could feel the air get a fraction warmer or colder, a strange current like the breath of a sleeping beast. But otherwise, the tangled tunnels of Sadre did all look the same. An endless repetition of caves and caverns and tunnels. He felt like they were going in circles. *Spirals*.

How could Xanthe possibly know where they were going? And yet, she seemed to.

They came to a kind of crossroads in the tunnel. The three paths, one ahead and one to either side, looked identical. Xanthe held up a hand for them to stop, while she alone continued forward to the very center of the intersection. She readjusted the pack on her shoulder and knelt, laying her hands flat against the stone, and closing her eyes. Conor didn't know if she was listening or feeling or smelling or using some other sense he didn't have. All he knew was that, when she opened her eyes a few seconds later and straightened, she gestured to the tunnel on the left.

“This way,” she said, continuing on without even looking back.

Kovo and Meilin each let out a skeptical sound, something between a sigh and a grunt, then shot dark looks at each other. Takoda chuckled, and even Conor managed a smile. It wasn't the first time the two had behaved alike. Meilin might have summoned Jhi the Panda, the picture of serenity, but she was as stubborn as the ape when she wanted to be.

Meilin strode after Xanthe, and Takoda and Kovo fell in step behind.

Now that he'd stopped, Conor's body felt sluggish, detached, and he struggled to make it move again. When the others had entered the tunnel and he had not, Briggan's muzzle found his thigh, nudging him forward. The gesture was small, but enough to coax his legs into motion.

“Thanks,” he whispered tiredly, running a hand along the wolf's scruff. Briggan leaned against his leg, not hard enough to set him off balance. Just enough to show Conor that he could lean on him, too.

“It's not magic,” Xanthe was saying when Conor caught up.

“Then how do you do it?” asked Meilin. “How do you know which way to go?”

“I listen to the caves,” answered Xanthe, as if this explained it.

“Will you teach me?” pressed Meilin, and Conor wondered if her insistence was because she didn’t think Xanthe really knew where they were going, or if Meilin simply didn’t like relying on anyone else for help. Probably both.

Xanthe chewed her lip. “I don’t think I can teach you,” she said. “I know because I have always known. And I have always known because I *need* to know.”

Meilin frowned. “Well, that is both mysterious and entirely unhelpful.”

“Sorry.”

Takoda, who’d been busy trying to teach Kovo how to sign a *question* instead of a *statement*—and having no success—looked up. “So everyone down here knows how to find their way?”

“Not everyone,” said Xanthe, stepping up and over a low rock, and holding a few tendrils of mossy rope out of the way so they could pass. “When the children in Sadre are—were—old enough to walk, our mothers and fathers would take us to a place in the caves, somewhere close to our homes, and leave us.”

Meilin let out a short gasp. “That’s awful.”

Xanthe shrugged. “It wasn’t far, and almost all the children could find their way back.”

Almost all, thought Conor grimly. And what of those who couldn’t? He’d seen animals in the wild abandon their young, focus their time and energy on those strong enough to survive.

“The next year,” continued Xanthe, skirting a crumbled section of wall, “the parents would take the children farther, somewhere with a few twists or turns, but still not *too* many dangers, and they would return home to wait. Every year, the children were taken somewhere and left to find their way, and every year, the path got harder, the pitfalls more precarious. Parents would spend all year teaching their children about the caves—how to make light, how to find food, which water was safe to drink, which mushrooms were edible and which were toxic, how to tell

where you were from the direction of the markings left by water in the rocks—to help them survive that one day. Every year ... ” Xanthe trailed off, lost in her own thoughts. Perhaps in memories of Phos Astos and the family she’d lost.

When Xanthe spoke again, she was smiling, but her voice was laced with sadness. “So no,” she said apologetically. “I don’t think I can teach you.”

Meilin stared at the girl with a look Conor had rarely seen before on the warrior from Zhong. He thought it might be respect. Or awe. Takoda’s mouth was open. Even Kovo’s face was steady with appraisal.

The tunnels around them were changing again, oscillating. Their ceilings and sides rose and fell in a way that made Conor’s head swim. He felt himself stumble once, then again, over loose rocks. The second time, he stuck out his hand and caught himself against an outcrop, the wall’s texture strange and chalky against his hand.

The stone was darker here, flaking like charred coal under his touch and smudging on his skin. A drop of sweat ran down his cheek and landed on his palm, turning the black ash into ink. He shuddered, feeling unwell, but straightened and forced himself to follow.

“Watch your step,” called Xanthe, treading gingerly around a hole in the center of the floor.

Conor wouldn’t have noticed it. Even knowing it was there, he nearly fell, and then he realized, too late, that it wasn’t clumsiness or fatigue slowing him down, weakening his limbs and robbing him of balance.

It was the parasite working its way through his body.

Panic rippled through him. He’d wanted to forget so badly that he almost had. Now the remembering hit him like a blow. His skin was burning, but his blood felt icy in his veins. The shiver, once an occasional thing, was now constant, a tremor that followed him through the days—if they could be called days in a place without sun—and into fevered sleep.

Briggan padded along beside him, his body a simple reassuring presence in the dark. Conor curled his fingers in the wolf’s fur, then recoiled as he felt the parasite shift beneath his skin.

A voice—like water over rocks—whispered through his head.

Xanthe glanced over her shoulder at Conor, and he fought back a shudder. Her pale skin, white hair, pink eyes, suddenly reminded him of the Many, those horrible creatures that had somehow once been human, and were now only *things*. And soon, too soon, Conor would be one, too.

Was there anything left of the Many but teeth and nails and horror?

What would be left of *him*?

The only physical difference between him and them was the dark spiral that marked their foreheads, and once the parasite finished its slow trek through his body, it would leave that mark on him, too.

How far had it spread?

He didn't want to see.

Didn't want to know.

But he had to.

Conor bit his cheek and slid the fabric of his sleeve up to his elbow. The last time he'd checked, days before, the spiraled tip of the mark stopped there, in the crook of his arm. He'd marked it with his nail, scratching a thin red line to note the parasite's progress. The line was still there, but the streak of black had vanished beneath his shirtsleeve. It was still moving, and Conor could only imagine the path it would take up toward his shoulder, his throat, his cheek, his forehead. He gripped his forearm until it ached, until his fingers left bruises on the skin. But it did nothing to stop the thing moving through him, just as it couldn't stop the whispers starting in his head, as soft and steady as a distant stream. Words muffled like voices beyond a door. Words he couldn't understand, and didn't want to.

Conor shook his head, trying to push away the voices, the image of the Many, the fear, and to remind himself that he still had a chance, still had time. If they could get to the Wurm before the Evertree died, if they could defeat the age-old creature, if winning could save the infected, if, if ...

Briggan looked up at him, his blue canine eyes wise and worried.

"It's okay," said Conor, trying to still the tremor in his voice, to sound calm and soothing, the way he did when he spoke to his sheep so long ago, when he was just a shepherd. Not a boy famous for summoning one of the Great Beasts. "We'll be okay."

Conor had always tried to tell the truth. He knew this was a lie, but he so badly wanted it to be true.

“What’s it like?” asked Takoda ahead, navigating the uneven ground with lithe steps that reminded Conor of Abeke’s grace. “Living in the dark?”

Xanthe shot him a smile. “I don’t know,” she answered. “What’s it like, living in the light?”

Takoda laughed softly. His blue monastery robes billowed behind him, now dingy from their trek through Sadre. “Fair enough. But how do things grow? Do you know what birdsong sounds like? What is—”

Xanthe laughed and held up her hands. “Slow down there. First of all, light isn’t the only source of nourishment. We have vegetables—carrots, potatoes, yucca—that thrive in the dark, and herbs that feed on the minerals in the rocks, and fungi that make their own light, and rocks that can spark fires. And your birds make song? Ours make sounds, but I wouldn’t call it music. More of a squeak. What do birds sound like above?”

Takoda brought his hands together and whistled into them, making a kind of melodic trill that echoed through the caves around them. Xanthe broke into a smile. Kovo scowled. The ape had been signing something at Takoda for several long seconds, but the boy’s back was turned, his attention on Xanthe. Finally, the Great Beast reached out and knocked him in the shoulder. Takoda would have tripped, had the ape’s fist not been tangled in the boy’s robes. Satisfied that he had the boy’s attention, Kovo signed again, slowly, deliberately, adding a snort of displeasure to the end like a punctuation mark.

Conor didn’t know what the ape was saying, but Takoda frowned a little, then wrested himself free. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe if you phrased it as a question or—”

But that obviously *wasn’t* the answer the ape wanted, because his lips curled back, teeth bared. Takoda rolled his eyes and turned toward Xanthe. “Kovo wants to know how much farther we have to go. He doesn’t like it down here.”

“That makes two of us,” said Meilin.

Conor was about to say *three* when his foot landed on something slick and he started to fall, not down but *through*. A thin layer of chalky ground gave way beneath his shoe. And then, abruptly, he stopped falling. Not because the hole was shallow—no, it plummeted down and away into nothing but blackness—but because something had caught his elbow. A massive hand encircled his arm, and he looked up to see Kovo glaring down at him with those red eyes. *Weakling*, said the crimson gaze. *Straggler*.

You're slowing us down.

You're holding us back.

Why should we try to save you?

You're already lost.

Conor wrenched his arm free and stumbled away from the ape and the hole, his back coming up against an outcropping. Pieces of wall flaked away behind him, revealing another small tunnel no wider than his hand, as if this section of the cave were a bad apple, riddled with wormholes.

And then, from somewhere deep inside the hole, he heard rustling.

At first he thought it was only the whispers in his head, but those were quiet and even. This sound was getting closer. Louder. A moment later Xanthe spun back, pink eyes narrowed, and Conor knew that she heard it, too.

“Get in the center of the cave,” she whispered urgently.

Meilin was the first to move, putting her back to Xanthe and shifting fluidly into a warrior’s stance, torchlight in one hand, quarterstaff in the other.

“What’s going on?” asked Takoda, even as he and Kovo joined the circle.

“Is it the Many?” asked Conor, pushing off the wall and putting his back to Takoda’s, the image of Phos Astos being overrun surging to mind. A tangle of pale bodies, empty eyes, clawing fingers.

Briggan crouched beside him, ready to lunge.

“No,” said Xanthe, clutching her pack. “It’s not the Many.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Takoda. And then, in the ensuing silence, “Isn’t that good, Xanthe?”

But the girl said nothing. The rustling sound grew nearer, the cave trembling and bits of stone crumbling away to reveal more and more holes, so many Conor thought the tunnel would collapse around them.

And then, embedded in the darkness, he saw the stars.

Conor's first thought was that they were somehow back above ground, that the cave had crumbled around them and revealed the night sky overhead. A brief rush of relief went through him. But then the stars began to blink and shift, and Conor realized with horror that they weren't stars at all, but *eyes*.

Dozens—no, hundreds—of milky white eyes.

Kovo growled, a sound deep in his chest, and Briggan bared his teeth. Conor waited for faces to form around the eyes, for the shapes of the creatures—whatever they were—to materialize, but they didn't. Instead, the eyes hovered, as if they belonged to the darkness itself. And then the darkness itself began to *move*.

"What on earth ... " whispered Meilin.

"It's a cyrix nest!" said Xanthe, as if anyone but her knew what that meant. But the tone of her voice was enough to tell Conor that whatever a cyrix nest was, it was *bad*.

The darkness was alive with the creatures. The shadows and eyes shuddered forward together, pouring through the holes and into the cavern, writhing and coiling and blinking their hundred white pupils.

Meilin shouted, and brought her quarterstaff down on a tendril of darkness.

Xanthe took the torchlight and swung it into the writhing dark. The cyrix retreated from the fire just like actual shadows, but then a limb surged forward and struck Xanthe in the chest. The force sent her staggering back into Meilin. The torch fell from her grip and skittered away.

On the damp cave floor, the torchlight began to sputter and die.

In its faltering flame, Conor saw Kovo bring a massive fist down on a writhing shape, blocking out several white eyes as his hand connected with something both solid and insubstantial. The creature bent like jelly around the beast's blow. The force of the ape's attack shuddered through

the darkness, and Conor realized with sick certainty that the seething shadows were *connected*.

The cyrix wasn't many things.

It was *one*.

One massive creature, either coming together or spreading apart, surrounding them in shadow and eyes and—somewhere, given their luck—teeth.

Something brushed against Conor's leg, and he tried to pull back, but the thing was already wrapping a smoky black tendril around his ankle. No, not a tendril. A *tentacle*. It latched on to him, cold seeping through his leg where the creature's touch met his skin. Conor gasped at the icy contact and tried to tear free, but the cyrix's grip only tightened. He felt himself losing ground, being dragged forward toward the nearest hole.

Conor stumbled and went down, grasping at the chalky floor for something, anything to hold on to as the cyrix pulled him toward the dark. A cry escaped his lips, and then he heard a growl and felt rushing air as a blur of fur tore past him. An instant later Briggan's teeth closed around the tentacle, and the wolf shook his head viciously, the way Conor had seen terriers do with rats.

The eye-dotted limb twitched in Briggan's mouth, and then wrenched itself free from the wolf's teeth and the boy's leg at the same time. It snaked down into the hole and out of sight.

But there were so many more.

Leg still tingling with cold, Conor grabbed a loose rock from the ground and hurled it at the nearest pair of eyes. The tentacle flinched back and then reared up to strike again as the torchlight faltered, plunging the cave into stuttering seconds of dark.

In the spasms of light, Conor saw Meilin swinging her quarterstaff, the motions fluid but wild, as if she didn't know where to strike; saw Xanthe digging through her pack, searching desperately for something; saw Kovo trying to put himself between Takoda and the monster, but the monster was *everywhere*!

"Does this thing have a weakness?" asked Conor, crouching to grab another rock.

“Yeah, Xanthe,” snapped Meilin, lashing out at nothing. “How are we supposed to fight this thing?”

Just before the torchlight failed for good, Conor saw Xanthe pull something small and spherical from the pack. “You don’t fight a cyrix,” she said, holding the sphere over her head. “You *run*.”

The torchlight vanished, plunging them all into darkness, but Conor still squeezed his eyes shut. He knew what was coming, and an instant later Xanthe’s hand must have tightened on the sphere, because light *exploded* through the cave. The cyrix hissed and recoiled, hundreds of starlike eyes vanishing like candles blown out by a gust. Xanthe wasted no time. She burst into movement, looking less like a girl and more like a ball of blue-white light as she ran for the nearest tunnel.

They all followed, ape and boys and girl and wolf, knowing that the flare would only buy them a few moments. But it was long enough. It had to be.

Conor was the last one out. He saw the extinguished torchlight and snatched it up, stumbling to keep up with the strange blaze of blue-white light ahead and not get left behind in shadow.

They ran when the path was even, and slid when the earth beneath them slanted away. They nearly collided with each other several times until the tunnel finally opened up, not into another cave, but into a massive cavern with half a dozen branching tunnels.

The ceiling rippled overhead. At the center of the cavern, pools of water shone like glass, emitting a faint greenish light.

Which was good, because the sphere in Xanthe’s hand had petered out.

“Well ... ” Xanthe slowed and stopped, letting the spent flare tumble to the damp cavern floor. “That was my last light.”

“Who knows,” said Meilin, who barely looked winded. “Maybe we won’t need any more.”

Takoda let out a small, nervous laugh. He was leaning against Kovo’s broad side. “Maybe,” he said.

Conor had his hands on his knees, gasping for air, his head swimming with the chase. Briggan stood beside him, hackles still raised. Kovo’s red eyes were trained on the darkness behind them, as if daring the cyrix to

follow. But long moments passed, and no milky eyes swam in the shadows, no tendrils of darkness crept toward them.

“Are we safe?” asked Conor.

Xanthe squinted around, trying to get her bearings. She nodded and said, “For now.”

Conor straightened and tried to manage a smile, but the world spun, and the horrible, squirming feeling under his skin redoubled. He clutched the crux of his arm, darkness swimming in his vision.

“Conor?” came Meilin’s voice, too far away. “Are you okay?”

Okay, okay, okay, it echoed through the cavern and in his head, mixing with whispers.

Conor closed his eyes, opened them, swallowed.

“Yeah,” he said, forcing himself to straighten. “Let’s keep going.” His eyes tracked to Xanthe, who stood reflected by a shallow pool, doubling into two, four, many. She turned toward him, her pink eyes multiplied.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “You look sick.”

Sick, sick, sick.

Conor looked to Meilin, who shook her head. Xanthe didn’t know, not about the parasite crawling through him, infecting him the way it had so many of her people. He tried to find the words but Meilin answered first.

“He’s tired,” she said. “We all are.”

Conor managed a nod, but Xanthe’s gaze lingered, eyes narrowing. “I’m okay,” he said shakily. To prove it, he took a step, and then another. “We need to keep moving.”

“Okay,” said Takoda, looking around at the cavern with its many branching tunnels. “Where do we go from here?”



UNWELCOME NEWS

THE LOW BRANCH CREAKED BENEATH ABEKE'S FEET.

She moved carefully across the tree limbs, watching, listening, an arrow already nocked in her bow, but the only sounds that met her ears were the sounds of any forest, the rustle of leaves and the trill of birds and the shuffle of small creatures in the branches and the brush. Somewhere on the ground below, Uraza prowled, and overhead, Rollan's gyrfalcon, Essix, was a shadow against the clouds, circling soundlessly.

Abeke shouldered the bow and climbed higher, until she broke through the forest canopy. In the distance, she could see the water that separated Amaya from Greenhaven, the dark shape of boats. They were almost to the water. Slowly, she descended back into the trees. Her body still ached from the fight with Zerif and his stolen beasts—*How?* How had he taken so many? And the even scarier question, *Why?*—and a deeper pain ran through her from whatever had shaken her own bond with Uraza. The first was muscle and bone. The second was something worse. Something that *scared* her.

They needed to get back to the Greencloaks' fortress.

Olvan would know what was happening, what to do. She hoped.

Beneath her, Uraza's dark shape slid past.

And then, all of a sudden, the leopard stopped.

Her head sank low and her tail flicked, nose twitching as if scenting prey.

Or predator.

Abeke held her breath and nocked an arrow in her bow, her mind spiraling through a dozen possible threats. Had Zerif come back? Had one of his infected animals stayed behind? What was lurking in the woods?

The big cat crouched, hesitated, and then pounced.

An instant later, a tinny shriek, cut short by Uraza's strong jaws, and the leopard reappeared, a limp woodland creature in her mouth.

Abeke rolled her eyes as the cat looked up at her, as if offering to share.

"That's okay," she whispered. "You can keep it."

Uraza blinked her violet eyes and began to play with her snack, and Abeke straightened and made her way back across the branches to the clearing where they'd camped. It was little more than a few trampled strides of treeless earth near the edge of the woods. Two exhausted figures huddled around a small fire contained by a circle of rocks.

She dropped to the forest floor, the mossy earth cushioning the force and sound of her landing.

"No sign of Zerif," she said.

Rollan jumped like a startled cat and spun, gripping the tiny stick he'd been using to nudge the fire. Its end smoked faintly. When he saw Abeke, he slumped back onto the dead log he'd been using as a seat. "Way to give a guy a heart attack," he said, tossing the stick back into the fire. "I didn't hear you coming."

"Sorry." Abeke managed a tired smile. "That's kind of the idea."

Rollan rolled his head on his shoulders. Abeke's attention went to the other figure, a boy in animal skins and a woven grass belt, his back against a fallen tree, a livid bruise against his cheek. Abeke's chest tightened. Anda. The boy had left his family, his tribe, and they hadn't been able to keep him safe. Where he had looked lean before, now he looked fragile, his narrow form gone gaunt from the wound at his side and the loss of Tellun.

Abeke didn't know what it felt like to lose a spirit animal, but she could see the pain in his eyes. Supposedly it was like losing a loved one, or a limb, a piece of yourself. Abeke made a silent promise that she and

Rollan and Meilin and Conor would find a way to stop Zerif, heal the Evertree, and return Anda's spirit animal.

When she thought about the tasks, they felt impossible. But Abeke reminded herself of all the impossible things they'd already done. They could handle a few more.

Still, she had to admit that the three of them had looked better.

They wouldn't have escaped Zerif at all, not without the help of the figure in the red cloak. Who was he? How was he strong enough to face a Great Beast? And why had he helped them? Abeke had so many questions for the stranger, but of course, he wasn't there to answer. He'd vanished into the trees after Zerif. It had taken all Abeke's restraint not to hunt the man down herself, but Anda needed her, and so did Rollan. They had to stick together, had to deliver Anda to Greenhaven, even without his spirit animal, Tellun.

Abeke shuddered at the thought of Uraza being taken from her. Even though she'd only had Uraza for a relatively short time, she couldn't remember what it felt like to live without her. Just the thought of it made her ill, an echo of the sickness she'd felt when the earth had shaken and her bond with the leopard had felt stretched to breaking. Those strange tremors were bad enough, and left her feeling like the earth and everything in it was being pulled and torn ... but to lose Uraza entirely?

How? How could a person be separated from their spirit animal? How could Anda bear it?

But of course, he wasn't bearing it, not well. His skin looked sallow, and his arms were pressed around his wounded side, where Suka the Polar Bear had slashed him. But she could tell the severed bond hurt him even more. There was nothing she could do for that, but his other injuries still needed tending.

Abeke crouched in front of the boy and dug some berries from her pocket. She'd found a high-growing bush in the forest, their seeds known to help with pain. Anda took them without question, his eyes never leaving the ground, where several elk tracks marked the last sign of his spirit animal.

"It's not far to the water," said Abeke. "We'll be back at Greenhaven soon."

“What’s the point?” whispered Anda, so softly she almost didn’t hear.

“You’re still one of us,” said Abeke, but Anda only shrugged, defeated.

Rollan said nothing. He had tipped his head back, eyes closed. She recognized the blankness in his face and knew he was looking through Essix’s eyes, seeing for himself what she had seen above the canopy. A few moments later he blinked, gaze returning to Abeke and Anda and the dying fire. He nodded and helped the other boy to his feet. Anda leaned heavily against Rollan, beads of sweat running down his face and staining the skins that wrapped around his shoulder.

Uraza appeared at the edge of the small clearing and began to pace, wearing paths into the forest floor. Abeke knew the leopard preferred to roam freely, but she’d stand out too much in the clearing leading down to the shore, and she wasn’t a fan of the crossing to Greenhaven. Besides, what had Zerif said to Anda before he stole the Great Beast?

That he hadn’t learned to bring Tellun into the passive state. If the elk had been in its passive state, would it have been safe?

“Uraza?” called Abeke, holding out her hand, a gesture the leopard knew well. But Uraza did not come. The Great Beast’s violet eyes shone with a wild glint, her tail flicking nervously. Panic wound through Abeke’s chest.

“Uraza,” she said, forcing strength and certainty into her voice.

The leopard slunk several paces, head low beneath her shoulders, looking less like a spirit animal than a predator.

“Please,” said Abeke softly.

The big cat stopped pacing, and seemed to *see* Abeke for the first time. Her head lifted, as if catching a scent, and her mouth lolled open as she padded forward, soft dark fur brushing Abeke’s hand before Uraza vanished in a flash of light. A sudden heat flared against Abeke’s skin, and then the mark was there on her arm where it should be.

She touched her fingers to it, trying to draw comfort.

And yet ... she could still feel the distance, the invisible cord between them drawing taut and slack and taut again, its strength uncertain. How long would it hold?

“Abeke?” She dragged her attention up and saw Rollan, shifting his weight as he tried to support Anda. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, and the three made their way out of the forest and toward the water in silence.



“Stew. A bath. Stew. A real bed.” Rollan helped drag the boat up onto the shore.

He had decided to pass the journey across the water by listing everything he planned to enjoy once they were back. Even though Abeke knew the only thing Rollan really cared about finding there was Meilin. Well, maybe Meilin and stew.

“Wait, did I already say stew?”

“I’m pretty sure you mentioned it,” said Abeke, tying off the rope. She looked around, but the docks were strangely empty. Up ahead, Greenhaven loomed.

Rollan’s mood seemed to brighten with every step toward the gates, but the closer they drew, the more Abeke had a gnawing sense that *something* was wrong.

It wasn’t anything specific, just a gut sense, but years of tracking and hunting in Nilo had taught her to pay attention when that feeling in her chest flared in warning. Surely if Abeke and Rollan had felt the strain on their bonds, the other Greencloaks had, too. Hopefully they knew what was happening, and how to stop it.

“Hey,” said Rollan, trying to hide his interest as they climbed the steps to the gate. “Conor and Meilin, they have to be back by now, right?”

Abeke smiled. “I’m sure. After all, they were only going to investigate the door in the Petral Mountains.”

“Let’s hope they ran into less trouble than we did.” His voice was light when he said it, but something twinged in Abeke’s stomach.

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “Let’s hope.”

By the time they passed through the gate and into the courtyard, Abeke could feel the tension in the air. Every face she saw seemed

drawn, and the guards all had their weapons out, their postures tense, as if they were trying to hold their ground against a wind.

But it wasn't just what Abeke *saw* that gave her pause, but what she *didn't* see. Something was missing.

And then Abeke realized, it was the spirit animals.

Every time she'd been to Greenhaven, she'd been met with parrots and foxes, meerkats and pelicans, a hedgehog and a boa constrictor and a dozen other beasts. They dotted the fortress with color, filled the air with sound. But now they were gone—no, not gone, of course, just drawn into their passive states. The black tattoos stuck out from collars and cuffs. Whatever had happened to Rollan and Abeke back in the Amayan forest, it had obviously happened here at Greenhaven, too. And the Greencloaks must be just as scared.

Only two animals were in sight: Olvan's moose, standing sentry at the edge of the courtyard, and Essix, still circling overhead. She was an ornery bird, as stubborn as Rollan.

But where was Kovo? The last time she'd been here, the Great Ape had been in the center of the square, surrounded by guards. Even as a spirit animal, he took up space. But there was no sign of him. Or Jhi. Or Briggan.

Rollan eased Anda down onto the steps outside the great hall. A medic rushed forward to see to the boy's wounds. He didn't resist, didn't even speak, only let the woman lead him away. Abeke caught him as he passed and squeezed his shoulder once, gently.

"It's going to be okay," she said.

Anda nodded vaguely but said nothing. The sadness in his eyes broke Abeke's heart.

"Some welcome party," said Rollan, turning in a circle. "Meilin?" he called out. "Conor?"

"I'm afraid they are not here," said Olvan, the leader of the Greencloaks, appearing at the entrance of the great hall. He looked older, or perhaps just tired, new creases etched into his face.

"Shouldn't they be back by now?" asked Rollan, fear edging his voice. "You ... you went with them."

"Yes," said Olvan slowly. "I did."

“Then where are they?” demanded Rollan.

“What’s going on?” asked Abeke, heart racing.

Olvan hesitated, his wrinkles deepening in thought. His eyes tracked over the courtyard, as if he didn’t want to speak of what had happened, not even in front of his own Greencloaks. Abeke’s chest tightened, the way it did when she was on uneven ground and could feel it shifting, about to give way.

What had happened to her friends?

When Olvan spoke again, his voice was carefully even, but his gaze was filled with warning. “You two look as though you’ve had your own troubles,” he said, holding open the door to the great hall. “Come inside, and we can compare notes.”



“What do you mean, they’re *trapped*?”

“Lower your voice, Rollan,” instructed Olvan. The boy’s words still echoed through the great hall.

Trapped ... trapped ... trapped.

Abeke looked around then, and realized that the great hall, usually buzzing with activity, had been emptied. The three of them were alone, Abeke and Rollan on one side of the long wooden table, and Olvan on the other. The surface of the table was piled with scrolls, and bowls of stew waited in front of them, quickly cooling as they sat untouched, forgotten.

“We don’t know exactly what happened,” explained Olvan, “only that the doorway collapsed behind them.”

“*What?*” squawked Rollan.

Abeke listened but said nothing. She ran her fingertips along the table’s surface, considering the hundreds of marks—scratches, dents, grooves—in its surface, focusing on the details as she tried to organize her thoughts.

She worried about them all, but she worried about Conor most. He was running out of time, and she couldn’t stop thinking about the mark crawling up his arm, about what would happen when—if—it reached his forehead.

The fight with Zerif came back to her, the horrible spiral on his face. The same mark was echoed in every one of the animals he now controlled, and the thought of him controlling Conor, too, made her stomach turn.

“You didn’t want to tell us in the open,” she said slowly. “The other Greencloaks don’t know, do they?”

Olvan rubbed his eyes. “Not all of them, no.”

Rollan looked pale with anger. “Why on Erdas not?”

The old man sighed. “The last few weeks have been trying on all of us, mentally as well as physically. I fear that this turn of events would be a blow we cannot afford.”

“I don’t care about the Greencloaks’ morale,” snapped Rollan. “Not when our *friends* are stuck under the earth with *Kovo*, the ape who tried to destroy the world!”

Abeke reached out and brought a hand to Rollan’s arm. She could feel his body, as tense as rope, beneath his cloak.

Olvan, for his part, looked as if he were carrying the weight of Erdas on his shoulders. Abeke could tell it was taking all his strength to keep his own voice even, his manner calm.

“Kovo is not what he once was,” said Olvan steadily.

“Look,” said Rollan, “I’m all about redemption, but you’ll never make me believe that Kovo is on our side.”

“He is on *Takoda*’s side,” offered Abeke, “and *Takoda* is on ours.”

“*Takoda* is trapped under the ground with the rest of our friends!” shouted Rollan, pushing to his feet. “How can you just sit there listening to this, Abeke? We have to go after them!”

“Sit,” commanded Olvan. “Where they’ve gone, you can’t follow. The door has caved in, and it’s too fragile to force our way through. Your friends are still alive—”

“How do you know?” Abeke cut in.

Olvan gestured at the mountain of scrolls on the wooden table, ribbons of red and blue and yellow tying them shut. “Word comes from many sources, Lenori among them. She can feel Briggan and Jhi, as well as Kovo. They are all still alive.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re safe!” protested Rollan.

“Have faith in your friends,” said Olvan. “*I* do. And know that you are needed here. With Zerif infecting people and stealing spirit animals, it’s more important than ever that you two find the Great Beasts before he does. Bring them here to Greenhaven so that we can protect them from whatever he’s planning.”

“But we failed,” said Abeke, her throat tightening. “Anda lost Tellun.”

Olvan’s eyes darkened. Abeke could see the worry in his expression. Not only for Anda, but for all of them, for whatever Zerif was planning, whatever he would do when—*if*—he got the rest of the Great Beasts. “Tell me everything.”

Abeke swallowed hard, and explained what had happened—first with Anda’s tribe, and then the appearance of Zerif and his stolen Great Beasts, the loss of the elk, the horrible strain on their spirit animal bonds.

“We, too, felt the straining of our bonds,” said Olvan grimly. “We can only assume it’s because of the Evertree’s rot. Lenori tells us that her own bond shuddered when the tree did.”

“And then there was the guy in the mask,” said Rollan, stabbing a spoon at his now-cold stew.

At this, Olvan stilled. “What guy?”

“He showed up at the last minute,” said Abeke thoughtfully. “He’s the only reason we got away.”

“He had a red cloak,” offered Rollan, “and he wore some kind of mask. Weird and faceless, gave me the creeps. Didn’t say anything. But Abeke’s right, he did help us.”

“The way he fought ... ” said Abeke.

“It was insane,” said Rollan, spirits brightening a little despite himself.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” added Abeke. “Not from Meilin, or my people, or even Zerif. It was like he ... wasn’t human. It was as if a spirit animal were giving him strength, but there was no animal around. Not that I saw.”

Olvan steepled his fingers. “Strange. A similar figure appeared here at Greenhaven not long ago, but his mask had the face of an animal carved in it. Some kind of cat.”

“So there’s more of them?” asked Rollan.

“It would appear so. This one called himself Worthy. He came asking for the Keeper. They left together and haven’t returned. For now, we must treat these strangers with caution. We don’t know if they are friends or foes.”

“But the one in the woods,” insisted Abeke, “he *helped* us.”

“Yet he conceals his face,” countered the leader of the Greencloaks. “We may share a common enemy in Zerif. But if you cross paths with him again, be careful.”

Rollan slumped back in his seat. “So, what now?” he grumbled. “We’re just supposed to sit here, waiting for news of our friends? Waiting for Zerif to strike again? Waiting for the Evertree’s rot to break our spirit animal bonds?”

“No.” Olvan shook his head. “I don’t expect you to sit here, waiting for anything.” He began sorting through the pile of scrolls on the table, searching for one in particular. Some were large, obviously brought by hand, while others were small and tightly coiled, the kind carried by messenger birds. Each was bound with a ribbon, yellow or red or blue ... never green. Abeke wondered if that would be too obvious. A message just asking to fall into the wrong hands.

Finally Olvan found the one he was looking for and plucked it out of the stack.

“This just arrived from Lenori.” He slid the yellow tie from the paper and unrolled it. “Another Great Beast has awoken. So eat up and get your rest, because you two leave at first light.”

“What about Anda?” asked Abeke.

Olvan sighed. “As soon as he’s strong enough, we’ll return him to Amaya and help him find his tribe.”

Abeke bristled at the idea that the boy was useless without Tellun. “But he belongs with—”

The man reached out and curled his old hand over hers. “It’s not your fault, but Anda has no place here without his Great Beast.”

A new wave of guilt rolled over her. They’d taken him away, all for nothing. The only thing she could do now was fight for him. For Tellun.

Rollan sat forward on the bench.

“So where are we going?” he asked.

Olvan pinned down the scroll with his mug and finally met their eyes.

“You’re going,” he said, “to Stetriol.”



4 SETTING SAIL

EVERYONE HAD OBVIOUSLY LOST THEIR MINDS.

That was the only explanation Rollan could come up with.

He shook his head and spit over the edge of the battlements. It was the middle of the night, the wind biting at his cheeks and messing his hair. He couldn't quiet his thoughts enough to sleep.

Stetriol, of all places. It couldn't have been Nilo, or Eura, or Amaya, or Zhong, or even Arctica! It had to be *Stetriol*.

He would rather face everyone he'd ever stolen from than set foot back in the land of the Conquerors and the Bile, Gerathon and Gar, the Reptile King and Shane.

Olvan claimed that the land at the edge of the world was different now, that it had changed. According to the leader of the Greencloaks, Stetriol was now full of happy people and frolicking pets and rainbows and—fine, Rollan might be exaggerating.

But still.

The last time he'd been in Stetriol, they'd tried to kill him. In fact, every encounter Rollan had had with Stetriol and its people had been *unpleasant*. And no matter what Olvan said, Rollan wasn't suddenly ready to assume the best from people who'd once showed him the worst.

"They're rebuilding," Olvan had insisted. "And we are helping them. We must show them they can trust us."

Rollan fought back a snort at that. Trust. He hadn't survived the streets of Concorba by trusting the people who were nice to him, let alone the ones who tried to stab him in the back. Sure, Stetriol had been

through some bad times, but it had been cut off from the world for a *reason*.

“Stetriol is now a post, occupied by Greencloaks,” Olvan had explained. “Our presence there is as large as it is here in Greenhaven, so you’ll be in good hands once you arrive. And this time you won’t be traveling alone.”

In the end, those words had helped to ease Rollan’s nerves a little. But he still wished Meilin was going with him. Wished she were *here*. He knew she’d had to go with Conor, so Jhi could help heal him, but it didn’t change the fact that Rollan *missed* her. Not that he’d say that to her face. She’d probably just tease him if he did.

Or maybe she wouldn’t.

Girls were confusing.

The wind on the battlements picked up. Rollan pulled his cloak tight around his shoulders. Below, the ocean made a constant shushing sound against the shore, while overhead it was a cloudless night with a bright wedge of a moon and a sea of stars. The kind of night that made Rollan feel small, though not in a bad way. Like he was part of something bigger.

He picked at the edge of his green cloak, the garment he’d been so hesitant to put on. After all, being alone could be scary, but being a part of something was way scarier. And yet, being a part of the Greencloaks had helped him get his own mother back, had brought him close to Abeke, Conor, and Meilin. It had given him family, friends, things he thought he’d never have.

He felt like he’d stolen something precious, and gotten away with it.

Rollan forced himself to smile. Once a thief, always a thief.

But someone—Zerif—was trying to steal those things back, and Rollan wasn’t letting go without a fight. He took a long, steadying breath and was about to whistle for Essix when he heard the footsteps behind him. Not the march of boots down in the courtyard, but the soft familiar shuffle of Abeke’s steps somewhere at his back. Rollan didn’t turn around. He knew that if he heard her coming, it was only because she *wanted* him to hear. He’d never met anyone so stealthy.

Meilin the warrior. Abeke the tracker. Conor the loyal leader.

What did that make him?

“Can’t sleep?” asked Abeke, emerging from the shadow of the keep wall.

Rollan shook his head.

“Essix is restless,” he said, blaming the bird. The falcon appeared for an instant against the moon, then was gone again, swallowed up by the sky.

“I can’t sleep either,” said Abeke. “Every time I close my eyes, I’m afraid I’ll wake to that feeling....”

Rollan knew the feeling she was talking about. He’d felt it, too. Like his skeleton was being torn from his body with the skin still on. Like something important inside of him was bending, bending, about to break.

“It seems like you and Essix are okay.”

“Me and Essix ...” said Rollan, squinting up at the night sky. Was that true? “We’ve always let each other be. If this spirit animal bond is like a rope, maybe there’s just more slack in ours. I mean, remember how long it took me to convince Essix to even go into her passive state?” Rollan took up a loose pebble and lobbed it over the wall. “Silly bird.”

He tried to keep his voice steady, but the truth was, Rollan was scared. He was having a harder time borrowing Essix’s sight these days. Even when he did, it felt unsteady, like he might fall at any second. Every time, he was left feeling dizzy, and like he’d eaten something rotten.

Rollan forced himself to take a deep breath. He felt trapped.

Trapped, like Meilin and Conor.

“Do you think they’re okay, Abeke?” He didn’t have to say who.

Abeke eased up beside him and leaned on the battlement. “Meilin’s a warrior. And Conor ... he’s a fighter. The only way for us to help them is to stop Zerif. And to do that, we have to get to Stetriol before he does.”

“Stetriol,” grumbled Rollan. “Land of the Conquerors, and Shane, and all the people who hate us.”

Abeke touched his shoulder. “People change,” she said. “Look at us. None of us are the same people we were when this first started. Whoever thought you’d finally put on that green cloak?”

Rollan snorted.

“Besides, abandoning Stetriol is what got the Greencloaks into trouble last time.” She looked out at the night. “You, me, Meilin, Conor, we’re supposed to be the future of the Greencloaks. If we choose not to help, we’re just repeating the past. We have to be better ... okay?”

“Okay.” Rollan bumped into her shoulder. “When did you get to be so smart?” he asked. “Are you hiding a talisman or something? Which Great Beast had all the brains?”

“Ha-ha.”

“We should get you some mystic robes. You can go around telling futures or advising nobles or whatever people in mystic robes do ... ” He trailed off into a yawn, and Abeke broke into a smile.

“Come on,” she said, steering him toward the stairwell. “We both need sleep if we’re going to set out at first light.” She cast a last glance back at the night, the moon, the glittering water. “Something tells me we’re going to need our strength.”



“Hoist!”

“Bartel, hand up that crate.”

“Careful with the apples.”

“Gera, got your medical bag below.”

“Have you checked the sail lines?”

“Don’t let those blades get wet!”

The sun was barely up, and the Greenhaven dock was already a flurry of activity. Rollan had secretly hoped that “we sail at first light” actually meant “we sail at a perfectly decent hour sometime after breakfast,” but his hopes had been dashed when Olvan pounded on his door before dawn.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he’d mumbled before rolling over and trying to stifle the beginning of dawn’s light with his pillow. But when he tried to close his eyes again he’d seen Meilin clawing through the dark, and Zerif’s grim smile, and the wormy black spiral forcing itself across Tellun’s forehead, and he knew that sleep was ruined.

Now, as they made their way to the shore, Abeke looked almost as tired as he felt, and far less excited about the ship waiting for them at the

end of the docks.

While she'd grown more comfortable with boats over time, Abeke had always preferred being on land. Plus, Uraza got seasick. The short trip from the Amayan coast was one thing, but a sea voyage to Stetriol was another.

Rollan's spirits were considerably brighter. Growing up on the streets of Concorba, he'd dreamed of fresh air and freedom, and life aboard a ship afforded both. Besides, when it came to modes of transportation, sailing was about as far from riding a horse as he could get, and in Rollan's book, that was a mark in its favor.

The *Tellun's Pride II* was a beautiful craft, sturdy with brilliant white sails, but it wasn't the ship that caught Rollan's attention: It was the crew!

Not a handful of escorts, but a *proper* crew of fifteen—no, twenty!—Greencloaks. All for their mission to Stetriol. The sight of them made Rollan feel rather important.

"This is quite an expedition," said Abeke. "Will we draw too much attention?"

Rollan deflated a little. Of course, she was the one to think of stealth.

"I've sent word ahead," answered Olvan. "They know you're coming. Besides, half of these Greencloaks are going to relieve those who are already stationed there."

Rollan deflated a little more. And then Abeke knocked his shoulder with hers and flashed him a smile, and he felt himself smile back. It was still an impressive crew. And besides, they were the chosen ones! They'd gone on their last quest without any help at all! And, okay, maybe that was a bad example because it didn't end so well, but still ...

"Awfully small for Greencloaks, aren't they?" said a voice behind them.

Rollan and Abeke turned to find two figures in forest green ambling down the docks toward them, packs on their shoulders. The first was a woman, tall with warm dark skin, a shock of short black hair, and silver in her ears. The second was a man, a head shorter and stockier, with pale hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"I was beginning to wonder if you'd join us!" said Olvan.

“Sorry we’re late,” said the woman. Her voice had a slight Niloan cadence.

“S’my fault,” said the man, who was all Eura. His collar was open beneath his cloak, and across the skin of his chest Rollan could see the edge of a tattoo. It looked like a monkey. Or at least a monkey’s tail.

“Of course it’s your fault,” said the woman, but her tone was cheerful. “Just be glad they didn’t sail without us.”

Her sleeves were rolled up, revealing a parrot tattoo that ran the length of her forearm, from talons to crest. She leaned her elbow on the man’s shoulder, and he didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he leaned into her as if they were old friends.

Will Abeke and I be like that one day? Rollan wondered. It was easy to imagine staying friends, but it was hard to picture getting so ... *old*.

“That would be hard to do,” said Olvan, “considering you’re the captain.”

Rollan’s eyes widened in surprise, but Abeke broke into a grin.

“Which makes me the first mate,” said the man. “And you two must be our cargo.”

“I’m nobody’s cargo!” said Rollan, at the same time Abeke said, “*Cargo?*”

He only chuckled.

“I’m Nisha,” said the woman, “and this is—”

“Oi, I can introduce myself,” cut in the man. “Arac. I’m Arac.”

Nisha raised a brow, obviously amused. “Do you feel better now?”

“Much,” grunted Arac. “A name’s a powerful thing to have,” he said, addressing Abeke and Rollan. “Can’t go handing it off to anyone.”

“I’m not anyone, *Arac*, I’m your wife.”

Rollan’s mouth fell open. He’d never met married Greencloaks before. Now he could see why.

“Close your mouth, boy,” warned Nisha. “Before something flies in.”

Abeke giggled as Rollan’s mouth snapped shut.

“Chop-chop,” said Nisha, striding up the plank.

“You heard the woman—er, I mean captain,” Arac amended when she cut him a glance. In a fluid gesture he took up Rollan’s and Abeke’s sacks and hoisted them onto one strong shoulder.

“You can see I’m leaving you in good hands,” said Olvan.

Abeke shot the elder Greencloak a worried look. To Rollan’s surprise, the lightness left the old man’s face and he knelt, resting a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Any advice?” asked Rollan.

“Yes. Take care. Watch out. And come back safe.”

“That’s awfully general,” said Rollan, tipping his head. “You got anything more specific?”

Olvan swallowed. “If you see that stranger, the one with the mask and the red cloak, be careful.” Olvan straightened, his joints popping and cracking with the effort. “I’m counting on you two,” he said. “We all are.”

“No pressure,” grumbled Rollan as Olvan mounted his spirit animal and made his way back up toward Greenhaven’s keep. Rollan thought he could see Anda beside the gate, dark eyes wide and watching. Rollan lifted a hand, but the boy—if it was him—didn’t respond.

“Get aboard or get left,” called Arac, pounding a meaty fist along the ship’s hull.

Abeke and Rollan climbed the ramp, and both cast a last glance back at Greenhaven as the ship put out to sea. They stood there watching as the fortress shrank and shrank, until it was lost from sight.

“Off on another adventure,” said Abeke, leaning back against a crate.

“I wonder if Stetriol has good stew,” said Rollan. Abeke touched her stomach as if the thought were unwelcome, and closed her eyes.

Overhead, Essix let out a short cry and swooped down toward the deck.

“I was wondering when you’d show up,” he said, trying not to sound relieved.

Essix landed on the ship’s rail just long enough to claim a scratch under her beak and another between her wings. Then she was off again, and so were they.



CALL TO THE KING

THE BOY SAT ON A LOW ROCK, SHARPENING A PAIR OF knives.

He was perched in the shadow of the tree line, shielded by a canopy of leaves while he worked. His cloak, a vivid red, sat at his feet, folded inside out to hide the crimson. His sleeves, crisp and black but torn from the fight with Zerif, were rolled to his elbows. The only sound beside the sh-sh of stone against metal was the rustling of branches overhead, their leaves caught up by the breeze. Now and then, his lips formed words—as if he were talking to himself, or to someone else, or simply remembering conversations long past—but they never took shape, never found sound.

His mask, a smooth plane of white wood, sat cast aside him on the stone. Unlike the others, with their ears and snouts, their horns and tusks, his mask held no such markings. It was even, featureless, save for the slits through which he saw and breathed and spoke.

When the knives were clean and sharp, he set them aside and rolled his head on his shoulders, trying to work out the stiffness that had settled in his muscles. A cut ran along his jaw—it was a testament to the force of the blow, that it even broke the skin—and his muscles ached, but he was alive, and so were the Greencloaks. But he hadn't been fast enough to save Tellun.

And in the end, Zerif had gotten away with his newest prize, vanishing in the trees.

The man seemed at times a monster, at others a ghost.

In the distance, the sun sank over the water, turning the ocean and the sky from blue to orange and purple and gold, the colors of a fading bruise. A clearing stretched between the boy's perch at the edge of the woods and the shore, and the boat waiting for him on the docks.

As soon as night fell, he would go.

Until then, he tended his weapons and nursed his shallow wounds. As he dabbed fresh salve over the cuts, his skin caught the setting sun, illuminating the band of scales that tapered down his forearm like armor, shifting from green to gold.

He paused, arm outstretched before him, and stared at the scales, marveling now the way he had when he'd first seen them. When he flexed his arm, they shifted in response, not like well-fit clothing, but like skin itself. He lifted a fingernail and ran it thoughtfully along their plated surface.

A bird screeched overhead.

Not a falcon or a pigeon, but a *crow*, a Ksenian crow, a southern tracking bird with a dash of white on its forehead. He held out his scaled arm, and the bird landed on his wrist. A message was bound to its leg with a single piece of dark red cloth.

The message was from Stead.

He recognized the young man's short, blocky script, even before he read the note.

Only a few lines, but that was all he needed.

King, it read.

A Great Beast has risen.

Return to Stetriol.

He jostled his arm, and the bird hopped free, waiting with curious eyes while the boy dug a piece of charred wood from his pocket, turned the scrap of paper over on the stone, and scribbled an answer. He then retied the note to the crow's foot. It clicked its beak, clearly expecting a reward. He fed it a scrap of dried meat and sent it on its way. Within moments, the bird was a speck of black in the reddish glare of the setting sun, winging its way toward the sea, King's message bound to its foot.

A single line, signed with a *K*.

Already on my way.

The boy they called King squinted until the crow was lost from sight, then slid his knives back into their holsters and took up his mask. He fastened it over his face, settled the red cloak back on his shoulders, and made his way to the boat bobbing on the dock.

To Stetriol.



SHADOW PLAY

TUNNEL AND CAVERN.

Tunnel and cavern.

Tunnel and cavern.

Meilin had been trained to map the terrain in her mind so she never got lost, but it didn't work down here. Not when everything looked the same! They were beneath the earth, she knew, but how far beneath? Feet? Miles? How long since the doorway had collapsed? How long had they been trapped underground, wandering the corridors of Sadre, the world under the soil? Days? Weeks? Time ran together just like the tunnels and caverns.

Meilin had tried to keep track, marking time on her sleeve with a bit of blackish chalk, but she'd given up one night after slipping in a puddle, the muddy water smudging the tallies beyond recognition.

Tunnel and cavern.

Tunnel and cavern.

It was maddening.

Down here, there was no up or down, no forward or back, no day or night. Time bled, and the simple beat of Meilin's heart was deafening in her ears. She couldn't distract herself from worries about Abeke, and Rollan, and Conor. She reached for Jhi's calm, which usually came to her, even in the panda's passive form, but where it once wrapped around her, now it felt more like a grazing touch. Still, Meilin clung to that comfort and resisted the urge to scream.

“We should stop here,” said Xanthe when their tunnel gave way to another cavern. “I’m sure we could all use some rest.”

Meilin looked around. It looked like almost every other space they’d passed through.

“Is it night?” she asked, before remembering that outside of Phos Astos, Xanthe likely had no way to keep track of day and night. “I mean ... is it the time when you normally sleep? How do you even measure the hours?”

This wasn’t the first time Meilin had asked that question, but Xanthe still answered patiently. “By the sound of the water in the rocks, and how tall the ground blooms are, and whether or not the wall rushes are awake.” Then she shrugged and added, “And how tired I am.”

“I think it’s fascinating,” said Takoda. “I mean, what is day and night without the sun and moon? How does a body know the cycles of need?”

Kovo and Meilin rolled their eyes at the same time, then caught each other and glared. She didn’t trust the ape or his scarlet gaze—a look that seemed constantly challenging, a body always on the verge of action. And yet what help had he been? He’d gotten them trapped here beneath the earth, and now he didn’t seem to be doing anything but biding his time. *For what?*

Briggan gave a soft whimper, and Meilin turned to find Conor half walking, half stumbling, bracing himself against a handhold of rock.

“I also judge the time,” said Xanthe soberly, “by how badly your friend needs to rest.”

“I’m all right,” mumbled Conor, but his blond hair was sticking to his face with sweat. Meilin could tell he was suffering. “I’m ... ” He trailed off as a shudder passed through him.

Meilin reached for his arm, but to her shock Conor jerked backward, a hiss escaping his throat.

The sound was so strange, so utterly *inhuman*, it stopped her in her tracks. Conor’s hands curled, not all the way into fists, but claws, and his expression twisted into something animal, his eyes vacant, and his mouth half open in a snarl.

Briggan leaped forward and put himself between Conor and the rest, not to protect him, Meilin realized with a start, but to protect *them*. Kovo

growled and wrapped his arms protectively around Takoda.

“What’s going on?” demanded Xanthe, pink eyes wide. “What’s wrong with him?”

Conor’s chest heaved as Meilin inched forward. Xanthe tried to pull her back, but she held up a hand, her eyes trained on her friend.

“Conor,” whispered Meilin. “You’re stronger than this. Fight it.”

The boy squeezed his eyes shut, another shiver rolling through him. Then he blinked and looked up, and his eyes widened. He was Conor again. The boy from Trunswick. The kindhearted Greencloak who’d stood beside her through thick and thin.

“Meilin,” he whispered. “I’m ... I’m sorry ... ”

He tried to take a step forward, but his knees buckled. Meilin was there by his side, catching him before he could fall. He was burning up as she lowered him to the cave floor, and when she pulled his shirt aside and saw the vicious curl of the parasite against his bicep, inching up toward his shoulder, his throat, his head.

Xanthe saw the mark then, and leaped away with a gasp.

“He’s *infected*.”

“But he’s fighting it,” said Takoda.

Xanthe shook her head. “Do you honestly think we would have cast our own people out if they could be saved? There *is* no way to fight it.”

“I refuse to believe that,” snapped Meilin. “He’s still my friend.”

“Not for long,” said Xanthe, wrapping her arms around herself. “And once the mark takes him, he’ll be able to infect *us*. This is how one become many. He can’t come with us, Meilin.”

“I’m not leaving him behind,” she said as she took the cloak from her shoulders, folding it for a pillow beneath Conor’s head.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no saving him.”

“You don’t know that,” snapped Meilin. “If we get to the Wyrms, if we defeat it ... ” She could hear the desperation in her own voice; she knew how it sounded, but she wasn’t just trying to make herself feel better. She believed he could be saved. She had to believe it. “Look, if he loses control, then ... ”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll talk,” said Meilin. “But until then, he stays with us.” She looked up. “Even if that means you won’t.”

Silence fell over them, broken only by Conor’s fevered breathing. Xanthe’s eyes flicked from Meilin to Takoda and Kovo, then down to Conor. The way she looked at him, like he was already gone, turned Meilin’s stomach. She gripped Conor’s shoulder. She knew what it felt like, to be trapped inside your skin, to be fighting against someone else’s control. She knew the fear, and the helplessness, and the *hopelessness* of that fight, and she wouldn’t let him go through it, not alone.

“Xanthe,” she said, fighting to keep her voice even. “I don’t know if we can do this without you, but I *won’t* do this without Conor.”

Xanthe’s pink eyes met hers. “Okay,” she said at last. “I’ll stay.”

“Thank you,” whispered Meilin.

Xanthe tried to manage a smile. “You wouldn’t make it far without me,” she said, but Meilin could see the darker truth in Xanthe’s pale eyes. The girl had nowhere else to go. No one to go *to*.

From the floor, Conor let out a small, stifled sound of pain, and Meilin flinched.

Jhi, she called desperately. With a flash of light and a quick burst of heat, the panda was there beside her in the cavern. *Jhi*’s head swiveled slowly to get her bearings, obviously hoping to find herself back above ground.

Sorry, thought Meilin. *Not yet*.

The panda turned her steady gaze on Conor’s prone form. *Jhi*’s face remained passive, and where that lack of expression used to frustrate Meilin, now she clung to it, trying to absorb the panda’s calm. *Jhi* leaned forward and rested a single paw on Conor’s chest, while Briggan paced, his hackles still raised.

For a long moment, no one said anything.

And then Xanthe clapped her hands. “Like I was saying,” she said, an edge of worry lodged in her throat. “I think it’s time to set up camp.”



The fire burned blue.

Xanthe said the color came from the moss they used for kindling. It was perfectly normal—she'd been surprised to see *their* torches burn gold and white—but the bluish tint made the cave seem even more unnatural, painting the cavern in tones that belonged to an underwater world, a place of ocean, not earth.

Meilin stood watch at one side of the cave, her quarterstaff in her hands. Conor and Jhi rested nearby, while Takoda and Xanthe sat by the opposite wall.

Ahead of her, the path was darkness—no, people spoke of darkness, but this was something thicker—and it played tricks on her eyes, pulling her imagination toward unseen threats until she finally dragged her attention back to the cavern.

Takoda and Xanthe had their heads together near the fire, making shadow puppets on the cavern wall.

First, Takoda made a butterfly.

Then, Xanthe made a blob that was apparently something called a snarle.

Next, Takoda made a bear.

Then, Xanthe made another blob with antennae she claimed was a gallor.

Takoda shook his head with a shy smile. “That’s not a real thing.”

Xanthe cocked her head, her pale hair glinting blue in the moss fire’s light. “Just because you don’t know what a snarle or a gallor is,” she countered, “doesn’t mean they aren’t real.” But there was a ghost of a smile at the edge of her mouth.

“You *are* making them up!”

Xanthe shrugged, but the smile widened. “Hey, you’d never seen a cyrix before either.”

At that, Takoda shuddered dramatically. “And I hope I never see one again.”

Kovo was supposed to be on watch, too, guarding the way they’d come, but the ape kept casting glances back at the pair by the fire.

He’s jealous, thought Meilin. She was jealous, too, jealous of the way they could laugh, even now. She knew that if Rollan were here, he’d make her laugh. Or at least smile.

Conor whispered in his sleep. He lay curled against the cave wall nearby. Briggan had finally stopped pacing, and now stood sentry beside the boy while Jhi worked her silent, soothing power.

The strain had gone out of Conor's face, and his breathing had grown steady and even. He wasn't the only one calmed by the panda's presence. Meilin could feel her heart slowing, her panic ebbing as she lowered herself to the cool cave floor. She put her back to the wall, crossed her legs, and tried to breathe.

"I'll take watch," said Xanthe from the fire, casting a nervous glance at Conor as she spoke.

Anger still flared through Meilin, at Xanthe's fear, and the fact that she understood it.

She wanted to lash out, to hunt down Zerif and attack him for hurting her friend and endangering so many. Instead she was stuck here beneath the earth, watching Conor suffer. Feeling helpless. Useless. The anger and panic and fear were like ropes, wrapping themselves around her. She wanted to fight back, to tear free, but knew that struggling would only make the dark feelings tighten. Instead, she nodded, and tried to breathe, ground herself the way her fighting instructors had taught her, and let the ropes fall away.

Overhead, the blue light danced, and Jhi's calm wrapped around her. Eventually she felt her eyes begin to unfocus.

But as soon as they drifted shut, she heard a voice.

Not a stranger's voice, or an animal's, not the gurgle and rasp of the Many or the sound of water on the cave walls. It was a voice she knew too well. Her father's.

Meilin's eyes snapped open.

"*Meilin,*" he called. The name echoed softly "... *eilin ... lin.*"

It wasn't coming from the cavern, but from the tunnel beyond, a snaking path where the blue firelight quickly gave way to impenetrable black.

Meilin frowned, wondering if she'd imagined the sound, but then it came again.

"*Meilin ... eilin ... lin.*"

“Did you hear that?” she asked, turning back toward the fire, but there was no one there. No Takoda and Xanthe making shapes. No Kovo looming. No Conor and Briggan curled against the wall.

Only Jhi, sitting before the fire, her dark round shape like a shadow puppet, and her face blank in a way that reminded Meilin of that horrible sensation when their spirit animal bond had been stretched.

“Jhi?” she called. But the panda didn’t look at her. Didn’t blink.

“*Meilin ... eilin ... lin,*” called her father. She knew it wasn’t him, knew it couldn’t be him, but there was so much strangeness here beneath the earth, and maybe, maybe, maybe ...

Meilin got to her feet. She could feel Jhi’s presence at her back, tugging, trying to keep her from following the sound, but Meilin had to know.

She called into the darkness. “Hello?”

Hello? Hello? Hello? It echoed.

But no other answer came.

Meilin took a step, out of the cave and into the tunnel, and then another, the blue light from the fire fading behind her until she could barely see the way ahead. Above her, roots pulsed like veins to a heart. As the tunnel sloped down beneath her feet, she knew it led toward the Evertree.

Every time she thought of stopping, the voice came again.

“Meilin ... eilin ... lin.”

But now it didn’t sound like her father.

It sounded like Zerif.

It sounded like Shane.

It sounded like Olvan.

It sounded like Conor.

It sounded like Abeke.

It sounded like Rollan.

It sounded like people she knew, and people she’d lost, and even people she hadn’t met.

The ground beneath her feet became tangled with roots. The walls pressed in with them, and the tunnel became narrower and narrower,

closing in until Meilin had to crawl on hands and knees toward the darkness at the heart of the world.

And then, all of a sudden, the tunnel gave way, and she was in a massive cavern, as big as the greatest hall in the largest fortress in Zhong.

She was kneeling on a stone floor, palms splayed, and under her fingers something had been gouged into the rock. Up close, it looked like a curve, but when she got to her feet, she gasped.

It was, of course, a spiral.

Meilin looked up, taking in the rest of the cavern.

The roots of the Evertree were *everywhere*. They wound around the edges of the space and over the floor. They climbed the walls and gathered together in the ceiling. Light streamed from every root, illuminating the strange chamber. A dozen of the strongest tendrils came together into a canopy overhead and trailed down like curtains in the middle of the cavern. *No*, Meilin realized, *not like curtains. Like bars.*

And standing there, in the center of the cage of roots, was a shape.

At first it seemed like a monster.

And then like a man.

And then like something else entirely.

Meilin knew just by looking at this *thing* that it was old, as old as the world, and as dark as the sky on a moonless night. Its presence seemed to soak up all the light and warmth, and radiate back a sickly cold.

It had no edges, and when it twisted toward her, she saw that it had no face.

And when it spoke, its voice whispered in her head, and the words all bled together like the rustle and crack and tread of the woods at night.

Meilin couldn't understand what it was saying, but it seemed *so very important*. Maybe, if she just got closer ... She took a step, and the words got clearer. But she still couldn't understand, so she took another, and another, until she was right in front of the cage of roots.

The darkness smiled, and lunged.

Its hands shot forward through the bars and wrapped around her throat and—

Meilin sat forward with a gasp.

She was still sitting on the cavern floor at the mouth of the tunnel. Someone had cast a cloak over her like a blanket. Xanthe was crouching over her, her pink eyes bright, her small, pale hand resting on Meilin's arm.

"You were talking in your sleep," said Xanthe apologetically. Jhi sat a few feet away, gaze even but eyes dark. Had she seen it, too? The Wyrms? Meilin saw concern and sadness tinge the panda's steady eyes, as if she knew what waited for them in the dark.

I'm sorry, the panda seemed to say.

They were so different, Meilin and Jhi, like fire and earth. Meilin would never have guessed that their bond would stay strong even now, under such strain. Maybe it was *because* of their differences. Meilin and Jhi were still distinct, and often at odds, unlike Conor and Briggan, who seemed to share the same soul.

Meilin couldn't help but wonder how Rollan was faring.

The blue fire had gone cold, and Kovo was holding up their own revived golden torchlight while Takoda rolled a blanket back into his pack.

"We should get moving soon," said Xanthe. "It's still a ways to go. Oh, and I found some rockweed for us to eat," she added, holding out a ropy plant the color of seaweed.

Meilin could imagine Rollan saying, "Mmmm, delicious," in his sarcastic way. A pang went through her as she realized how much she missed him. She hoped he and Abeke were faring better on their own mission.

"Thanks," said Meilin, accepting the plant with dignity. She raised it to her mouth and hesitated.

"Best not to try and actually *eat* it," explained Xanthe. "The nutrients are in the juice. You chew on it, like this." Xanthe demonstrated, chewing on the stalk the way Meilin had seen farmers in the countryside do, trying to keep their mouths from going dry on the hottest days of harvest. It wasn't a very elegant process, but Meilin was crouching on a damp cave floor, her clothes stained with soil. There was a time for elegance, and a time for survival.

Besides, the rockweed actually tasted *good*, like honey and river water, and soon Meilin didn't care what she looked like, chewing the strange—fruit? vegetable?—food.

Across the cavern, Jhi and Kovo seemed to be engaged in a staring contest. The ape was much larger than the panda, but even he obviously wasn't immune to her influences, and Kovo was the first to break away, his red eyes escaping to the floor with a snort. Jhi made a small sound and rocked slightly, and if Meilin didn't know better, she'd think the panda was being smug.

"We need to get going," whispered Xanthe, tossing aside a spent stalk of rockweed.

Meilin didn't understand why the girl was keeping her voice low until she saw that Conor was still curled in the corner. Briggan's long body was stretched out beside him, like a barrier between the boy and the rest of the cave.

She hated to wake him, but the fact was that only reaching—and defeating—the Wyrms could save him. Jhi could slow the sickness, but the panda couldn't stop it.

Meilin got to her feet. Her whole body felt stiff, as if ... well, as if she'd spent the night sitting on a cold cave floor. She flexed her muscles, aware of how long she'd gone without a proper fight—sure, there were plenty of things to run *from*—and how badly she wanted to avoid one.

She reached a hand toward Jhi. The panda considered her a moment before slowly bowing her head and vanishing in a burst of light and heat.

Meilin crossed the cave to Conor, but before she could reach out a hand, his eyes were drifting open.

Briggan stretched and nuzzled the boy's cheek.

"Hey there," he whispered, a tired smile tugging at his mouth.

"You're awake," said Meilin, kneeling beside him. "How are you feeling?"

Conor sat up and rubbed his head, the blond tufts standing up in a dozen directions. Before she could stop herself, Meilin reached out and smoothed the hair, feeling his forehead as casually as possible.

With Jhi's help, and a few hours of sleep, at least his fever was down again.

“What happened last night?” he asked.

“You got ... sick,” she said, searching for the right word.

His gaze went to his infected arm, folded against his ribs, and then to Xanthe, who was standing across the cavern, watching. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought I could—”

“Conor, you should have said something.”

He swallowed. “I’m already slowing us down.”

“You have to tell us when it gets bad, okay? You have to tell *me*. That’s what friends do.”

He shook his head and wouldn’t meet her eyes. When he spoke, his voice was sad and lost. “There’s nothing you can do.”

Meilin tensed.

There’s nothing you can do.

They were her five least favorite words.

When Zhong had fallen, she’d heard them.

When her father had died, she’d heard them.

But she wouldn’t accept those words, not now. Maybe she couldn’t save Conor—not on her own, not without help and time and luck—but there *was* something she could do. She could stand at his side. She could be strong enough for both of them.

“You need to eat.” Meilin handed him a stalk of rockweed. “It’s actually not bad,” she said in response to his cautious look.

Briggan sniffed the plant, recoiled, and looked pitifully at Conor until he dug a scrap of dried meat from his sack.

“I can feel it,” he whispered, turning the rockweed over in his hands.

She expected him to say the parasite, but instead he said, “The Wurm. I can feel it here,” he said, touching his arm. “But also there,” he added, pointing down the tunnel Meilin had guarded, the one she’d wandered in her sleep. “We’re getting closer.”

Every inch of Meilin’s skin crawled at the thought of facing the monster from her dreams, but she forced herself to smile. “Good,” she said, holding out her hand.

Conor took her hand and got to his feet, but he looked uncertain. “Is it?”

“Yes,” said Meilin. “Because the sooner we get there, the sooner we can fight.” She wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “And the sooner we fight, the sooner we can *win*.”



TROUBLE AT SEA

THE *TELLUN'S PRIDE II* CUT LIKE A KNIFE THROUGH THE waves, buoyed along by a strong current, a good wind, and a stretch of clear sky. It was a grand ship, and with the help of the breeze and the two whales at the bow pulling it along, they were well on their way to Stetriol.

"About time something went our way," said Rollan, turning his face toward the morning sun. "This weather is amazing!"

"Don't say that," warned Abeke. She was sitting cross-legged on a wooden crate, rolling an apple between her palms. "You'll jinx us."

"Come on," said Rollan, waving his hand. "How can I jinx us? There's not a cloud in the sky."

"I'm serious," she said. "Don't talk like that."

But now he couldn't help but tease her. "You know what?" he said. "I bet we get all the way to Stetriol without a drop of—" He was interrupted by the apple that Abeke lobbed at his head. Rollan dodged, and it caught him in the shoulder instead. There wasn't much force behind the blow, and he finished defiantly, "*—rain.*"

Abeke shook her head as he rubbed his shoulder where the apple had struck.

"*Tenavo,*" she said.

"What's that?" he asked.

"That was the word for bad luck in my village. Not just any bad luck, but the kind you ask for."

"Superstitious girl," grumbled Rollan, fetching up the fallen apple. He took a big bite.

“You’ll see,” she warned.

Ten minutes later, the storm rolled in.

They stood at the rail, watching it form on the horizon. It approached at first like a malevolent ship, and then something much bigger than a ship, and then a *wall*.

Within minutes, the storm was on them, and it was raging. It swallowed up the blue sky, carrying clouds that went from white, to gray, to charcoal. Thunder rumbled through them, and lightning danced, and then the rain came, crashing down like a wave.

Within seconds, they were soaked through.

Rollan craned his head back, squinting through the icy rain. “Essix!” he called up into the worsening storm, but the bird was nowhere to be seen. She probably had the good sense to get above the clouds. Right about now, as the ship rocked under the growing swells and shuddered under the force of the rain, Rollan was wishing he could do the same.

He had seen his fair share of bad weather, but he’d always been on land, crouched under an awning or in a doorway, tucked behind some bins or under a set of stairs. He’d never been in the middle of it.

Now, standing on the deck of the *Tellun’s Pride II*, he didn’t have much choice.

The downpour battered the deck and crashed against the hull, the ship bucking like an angry horse beneath them. Soon it was all they could do to stay on their feet.

Abeke glared at Rollan. “*Tenavo!*” she repeated, the word sounding more like a curse as she shouted at him through the gusts of wind and torrents of rain.

The crew, most of them caught just as off guard by the sudden storm, now scrambled over the deck, tying down all the cargo, tarping the crates, and collapsing the sails. Abeke and Rollan helped to drop an anchor so they wouldn’t be hurled off course, but the rope got stuck in its crank, and as they heaved at it, they both nearly went overboard.

“Get inside,” ordered a stocky Greencloak as Rollan slipped and slid on the waterlogged deck and Abeke fought to keep her own balance. “Before you’re washed away.”



They sat in silence at a table in the ship's galley. Their clothes were soaked through, dripping water on the table, the bench, the floor. A few other Greencloaks sat at the table, too, most of them looking just as bedraggled.

Abeke stared across at Rollan. Her dark skin had a greenish tint from the sloshing of the waves. She was nursing a glass of juice instead of food, and obviously waiting for him to say something. Her fingers tapped out a beat on the table, and even though the sound was lost beneath the groan of the ship, he could feel her tension. She was as coiled as a cat.

"Well?" she said at last.

Rollan fidgeted damply. He looked up at the ceiling, at a lamp swaying on its hook. A drop of icy rain dripped from his hair and slid beneath his collar. He shivered, wondering if he would ever be dry again. More rainwater dripped from his hair into his soup. "Well?" he echoed.

"Are you going to apologize?"

"For what?"

Abeke let out an exasperated sound. Rollan had to fight back a smile—it was the kind of noise Meilin would make. "I told you," said Abeke sharply. "I told you not to test our luck. Am I such a superstitious girl now?"

"Fine, fine," said Rollan, rolling his eyes. "*Tenavo.*"

Abeke blew out her breath and said something in her native tongue. Even though Rollan didn't know the words, he got the idea. She brought her head to rest on her arms, Uraza's tattoo crouched across her skin.

He chewed his cheek. "Okay, so how do you undo it?" he asked, running a hand through his wet hair. "This *tenavo*?"

Abeke glanced up, the ghost of humor in her eyes.

"I mean," he went on, "assuming it exists, and assuming *someone* is noble and selfless enough to try and undo its effects even though he definitely didn't cause it, what would they have to do?"

"Well," she said thoughtfully. "They would have to do the magical *intenavo* dance."

Rollan's eyes narrowed with skepticism. "Is that so?"

"Indeed," said Abeke, nodding gravely.

“And how would someone do this *intenavo* dance?”

Abeke looked around. She got to her feet and plucked some dried herbs from the wall, bracing herself against the counter when a particularly bad swell made the ship sway.

“We normally use flowers, but these will have to do.” She plucked a few colorful herbs and stuck them in Rollan’s wet hair. “Now you get up, and hold out your arms and bounce up and down on your toes five times, then move your hips in a circle, all while saying, ‘Forgive me, Great Tenavo. I am a foolish boy.’ ”

Rollan looked at her skeptically. “And that will help?”

Abeke shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt.”

The Greencloaks at the other end of the table were watching with amusement. Rollan felt his face go red. But he took a deep breath, and he did it. He got to his feet, and held his arms toward the ceiling, and bounced on his toes, and swiveled his hips, and said the words.

After the first round, the sky bellowed with thunder, and Abeke said he should probably try again.

“I don’t think it’s working,” sighed Rollan, sagging back onto the bench after the third or fourth attempt.

Abeke was sitting on the bench, smothering a fit of giggles behind her hand. Rollan could feel a smile working its way onto his own face. He didn’t mind being silly, if it made Abeke smile. Ever since they’d faced Zerif in the forest, she’d been closed off, distracted. “You did your best,” she said, stifling a laugh.

The galley door flew open, and the captain and first mate blew in.

“I see you two got caught in it, too.” Arac’s voice carried ahead of him through the room.

“Quite a storm out there,” said Nisha, a few steps behind. They both had had the good sense to trade their greens for hooded weatherproof cloaks. A handful of Greencloaks trailed in behind them, a stream of seawater in their wake.

“Came out of nowhere, didn’t it?” chimed in Arac. “Someone must have challenged the sea.”

Abeke shot Rollan a look, and Rollan ducked his head over his food.

“Arrogant thing, the sea,” continued Arac, fixing himself a bowl. “Can’t help but rise to a challenge.”

Rollan gripped his bowl.

“Gotta be careful what you say around it.”

“It was my fault, okay?!” announced Rollan. “I did it!”

The other Greencloaks shot him a variety of looks, some amused, others annoyed, all damp.

Arac only chuckled. “Should’ve known.”

“If a ship can’t weather a storm,” said Nisha, “it isn’t much of a ship.” She offered Rollan a wink, and he felt his shoulders relax. The captain scrunched up her nose. “Are those bay leaves in your hair?”

Rollan was about to explain about the luck-restoring ritual when he felt something move around his feet, and then a dark shape leaped up onto the bench, vanished again, and appeared on the table in front of him, holding what was left of his chunk of bread.

It was a spider monkey.

Arac’s spider monkey, judging by its mischievous expression and the fact the man’s tattoo was now missing from his chest. Before Rollan could reach for his bread, the monkey was off again, scaling Arac’s arm to perch on his shoulder.

“Nexi,” said Arac, by way of introduction. The spider monkey tipped its head.

Rollan glanced at Nisha, who was pouring herself some soup.

“Where’s your parrot?” he asked before he could stop himself. Nisha gave him a knowing look.

“It’s a little cliché, don’t you think? A captain strolling around a ship with a parrot on her shoulder?”

“All you need is an eye patch,” offered Rollan cheerfully. “Or a wooden leg.”

Nisha chuckled good-naturedly. “Truth be told, Relis doesn’t care much for the open water. Besides ...” Her expression darkened. “I’m sure you’ve felt the strain. I feel better keeping him close, until we find a way to fix it.”

“That’s probably a good idea ...” Rollan looked up at the ceiling and wondered where Essix was. He’d been scared to test their connection.

Scared Essix would pull away. As long as he let her roam free, he could pretend everything was still okay between them. He didn't have to find out if it wasn't.

"What about you, Arac?" asked Abeke. "You don't feel the same?"

Arac snorted. "I'd like to see you try and make Nexi do anything she doesn't want to do." The spider monkey, who'd been busy hiding bits of bread in Arac's blond ponytail, looked up at the mention of her name, flashed a grin full of teeth, then went back to work.

Nisha came over, carrying two bowls of soup and spilling neither—which Rollan thought was seriously impressive, considering how much the ship was swaying.

"It'll calm," she said, casting a look at Abeke, who was clutching the table's edge. "These kinds of storms, they don't last long."

The captain sat, pushing the second bowl of soup in her husband's direction. "Before you know it, we'll be in Stetriol."

Rollan's gaze went to their sodden green cloaks, hanging on hooks along the galley wall.

"Still not sure how good I feel about wearing green over there," he said. "Feels a bit too much like wearing a target on my back."

"Olvan said—" started Abeke.

"I know, I know," said Rollan. "It's just ... does Olvan even *know* what Stetriol's really like these days? Has he been there himself?"

"*We* have," said Nisha, nodding at Arac.

"Really?" asked Abeke. "What's it like?"

"Weird," grunted Arac.

"Different," said Nisha at the same time. "Better." Arac grumbled something unintelligible into his bowl as he drank down the rest of the soup.

"What was that?" challenged Nisha.

Arac set down the empty wooden bowl with a thud. "I said it's still *Stetriol*."

Nisha shook her head, as if they'd had this conversation before. "Arac."

"I lost my brother to the Conquerors," said the man.

“We all lost someone,” countered Nisha. “That is the nature of war. But if we keep looking back, we’ll never move forward.” She turned her attention to Rollan and Abeke. “It’s amazing, the difference. You won’t even recognize it. It’s not just about what’s there, it’s about what’s *not*. The air is different, clearer. The people are healthier and happier. It still has a ways to go, but it *is* progress.”

Rollan pushed his bowl aside. “Maybe they should rename it. To help people forget.”

The captain shook her head. “They don’t want to erase the past, Rollan. They just want to move on. And we can help them. So much is changing in Erdas, and most of it for the worse, but Stetriol is changing for the better. And that’s something.”

Silence fell over the galley.

“Do you feel that?” asked Nisha, cocking her head.

Rollan didn’t. “No.”

“Exactly,” she said with a smile. He realized then that he didn’t feel the ship swaying, didn’t hear the wind and rain barreling the sides and sails.

“The storm,” he said. “It’s over.”



THE DANGEROUS DEEP

THE STORM HAD INDEED PASSED.

Not slowly, but all at once, just as it had come.

Standing on deck, Abeke could see the dark mass of clouds moving away, retreating like a curtain of shadow across the sea, leaving still, blue sky in its wake. “Fickle thing, the sea,” said Arac. “Isn’t it?”

Abeke smiled and shot a look at Rollan beside her, but he only shook his head, dislodging the last few bay leaves she’d stuck in his hair. They fluttered down to the deck. “No way,” he said. “I’m officially done goading the ocean. From here on out, I plan to tell it how nice it looks, and how much I respect its prowess.”

Abeke laughed and looked around. The change *was* kind of incredible. With the bad weather gone, the sea glittered in the light. It reminded her of the Niloan grasslands after the sun came up and before the dew burned off, when everything was still wet. It didn’t seem possible—after all, they were on the ocean, *everything* was wet—but that was how she thought of it. Sparkling. Fresh. Even the air tasted better, less like salt and more like, well, *air*.

Abeke drew in a deep breath just as a screech sounded overhead. Relief flooded Rollan’s face, and moments later, Essix dove, landing on the boy’s shoulder, her talons digging into the wool of his cloak.

“Maybe we should get *you* an eye patch,” teased Nisha.

“Only if you make me captain,” countered Rollan with a grin. He touched his temple against the bird’s crown, and Essix took wing again,

sweeping over Arac's head. The gyrfalcon plucked a piece of soggy bread from the man's ponytail before banking up again.

"And I thought Nexi had a mind of her own," Arac mumbled as the bird landed on the mast. His attention turned to Abeke. "When are we going to see that Uraza of yours?" he asked.

Abeke's chest tightened, her hand brushing the tattoo on her arm. "I imagine when we're back on—"

But she was cut off by a terrible sound, like a drowning cry, and the horrible give beneath her feet as the ship torqued sharply to one side.

"Did we hit something?" asked Rollan. But the ship hadn't stopped. It was still pressing forward in a halting way, jerking side to side as it did.

Even the most experienced sailors stumbled, fighting for balance, and calls of alarm went up across the deck. Abeke dropped instinctively into a crouch, but before she could catch Rollan's sleeve, he went down hard on his hands and knees as the ship groaned beneath them. Luckily most of the cargo was still tied down from the storms, but the people weren't.

"What's going on?" shouted Nisha, who was somehow upright and moving swiftly across the deck.

Just then the ship rocked heavily, as if hit sideways by a massive wave. Even in the midst of the storm it hadn't swayed this much. Now, as it careened between the bright sun and calm sea, Abeke knew that something must be very wrong.

"The whales!" demanded the captain. "See to the whales!"

Abeke stayed crouched, clutching the base of a nearby rope for support, but Rollan struggled to his feet.

"Stay low!" she called, sensing another shudder from the ship. But he didn't hear her; he was already up. He made it halfway to the bow before the spasm came. The ship hurled forward and Rollan went down like before, but this time the deck wasn't flat beneath him. The whole thing was banking steeply to the right, ocean spraying up in a cold mist.

And when Rollan fell, he slid.

The deck was still slick from rain, and he skidded toward the rail. Abeke let go of her rope and lunged for him, skinning her knees and catching his wrist before he could slide beneath the wooden rail and crash down into the deep.

“I’ve got you,” she said, panic flooding her as she felt her grip begin to slip. But the ship was already tilting back the other way, and they managed to scramble away from the edge.

Rollan was gasping for air, but his eyes were still fixed on the rail. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” she asked, breathless.

“There was something down there. In the water. I thought I saw a—”

But his words were lost as the ship shuddered again, and Nisha’s orders broke their attention.

They got to their feet; by the time they reached the bow, they found half the crew struggling with the lines that held the whales in place. One of the two beasts was pulling the craft sideways as it tried to escape the second, which was thrashing and writhing against some invisible attacker beneath the current. Abeke scanned the water in search of sharks, or eels, some trace of blood, but there were no signs of whatever was attacking the whale. It dove, or tried to, but the harness binding it to the *Tellun’s Pride II* held, and the ship bobbed dangerously, like an apple dropped into a bucket.

There was a cry, and two men nearly went over, clinging to ropes and rails for support as others rushed to haul them back on board. The whale kept twisting and turning, as if possessed. It was obviously losing strength—but it might still have enough to wreck the ship before it tired.

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Rollan.

“It must be hurt!” said Abeke.

“Cut it loose!” ordered Nisha, but no one seemed able to get close enough. The harness had gotten tangled during the whale’s panic. “Cut it loose before it sinks the whole ship!”

Arac was at the bow, calling out orders, sawing at the ropes as fast as he could. But the storm had left them wet, the knots swollen with rainwater. He dulled one blade on the waterlogged ropes, cast it aside, demanded another.

“It’s not giving, Nisha! We’ll have to unfasten the harnesses from the whale’s end.”

Abeke was already swinging a leg over the side, getting ready to jump into the roiling sea.

“Wait!” cried Rollan, and she could see he was still shaken from whatever he’d seen in the water. Abeke hesitated.

But Nisha didn’t.

The captain tore off her cloak and swung her legs over the railing, a knife already out and clutched in her grip. She dove with the experienced grace of a lifelong swimmer over the ship’s side and into the water below. Arac paled when his wife went over but didn’t abandon his work.

Rollan drew his own short knife and set to sawing beside Arac, casting glances every few seconds at the churning waters where the whale still thrashed. One of the ropes of the harness finally broke, but the metal hook on the other had warped, pinning it to the ship. Beneath the current, Abeke could see Nisha’s shape moving alongside the panicked whale. She hadn’t even come up for air.

“Swims like a fish, my wife,” said Arac, his voice tight with pride and fear.

All of a sudden, the rope went slack. Far below, Nisha must have finally gotten the harness from the raging creature. The ship stopped bucking and rocked to a halt, the world evening out around Abeke. She hadn’t realized how much it was churning until it went still. The wounded whale didn’t surface. Instead it dove, a dark shape disappearing into the depths of the sea, and an instant later, Nisha broke the surface of the water, gasping for air.

Abeke felt *herself* gasp with relief, and then realized every other hand on board was sighing, too.

A pair of Greencloaks was throwing a rope ladder over the side, and Nisha scaled it, taking half the ocean with her. Water ran down her limbs and over her clothes as she ascended, her face drawn. When she hoisted herself back over the ship’s rail, water pooled at her feet and a woman rushed forward with a coarse towel.

“A bit brisk for a swim,” said the captain, teeth chattering, and everyone laughed, but the air was still tense with confusion.

“What happened?” asked Arac, his voice and gaze searching.

“Was it ill?” asked another.

“Was it injured?”

“Was it mad?”

“Was it frightened?”

“What could have possessed it so?”

The questions came in a wave, and Nisha held up her hand for order. “Be calm.” But something was wrong, thought Abeke. She could see it in the captain’s eyes, in the way she leaned back against the rail, not just for breath, but for strength. She didn’t know what had happened beneath the current, but she could see that the captain was shaken. Badly.

She shot a look at Rollan and saw his face tight with concern. Whatever was wrong with the captain, he’d seen it, too.

“The whale wasn’t simply frightened,” explained Nisha. “Something attacked it.”

Rollan went pale, and Abeke wondered what he’d seen moving beneath the surface.

“A shark?”

“A sea eel?”

“But there was no blood in the water,” pressed Arac.

Nisha was shaking her head. “Because the whale wasn’t bleeding.”

“I thought you said it was being attacked.”

“It was.” When Nisha spoke, the words seemed to take a lot of effort. “There were no teeth marks. No claws. No wounds.”

“Then how—”

“It was being attacked from the *inside*.”

“How do you know?” asked an older Greencloak.

“Because I *saw* the thing attacking it,” said Nisha grimly. “I saw it moving beneath the whale’s skin.”

Abeke went very cold.

“I tried to cut it out,” Nisha continued. “But it was no use. When my knife cut through, it ... it became two.”

At that, Nisha gritted her teeth and held out her hand. It had been curled into a fist at her side while she spoke, but as her fingers peeled away to reveal her palm, Abeke saw something that made her heart turn.

She heard Rollan’s breath catch in horror beside her.

In the center of Nisha’s palm was a small dark mark.

A spiral was buried in her skin.

A parasite. Behind Abeke's eyes, she saw Conor's outstretched arm, the horrible mark that seemed to twitch beneath his skin, stealing time and life and sanity. No. No. Not this. Not again.

Arac must have recognized it, too, because the man let out a strangled sound of fury as the parasite writhed and wound its way up Nisha's palm and over her wrist.

"I tried to ... " The captain trailed off, swaying on her feet even though the deck was now steady. Arac was there to catch her before she could fall.

"Nisha, Nisha, stay with me," demanded Arac as the captain shivered against him. "Where's Gera?" he shouted, calling for the Greencloak's medic.

The woman was already pushing her way through the gathered crowd, kneeling in front of them and tearing strips of cloth to bind around Nisha's elbow, as if the parasite could be contained by a simple tourniquet.

"Get back," Arac growled as the crew pressed in. Abeke didn't realize she'd been edging forward, too, until she felt Rollan's hand on her arm. The weight of his touch was a comfort, a sign of solidarity as much as a barricade, holding her at bay.

She watched as Gera drew a knife and pressed the tip into the captain's forearm, skewering the dark shape that writhed beneath the surface.

"I've got it, I've got it," said Gera. And that's when Abeke realized that Gera didn't know how sinister the parasites were, how infectious. The medic let out a sound of dismay as, to everyone's horror—everyone's horror and Abeke's sadness—the parasite divided in two once more, half still burrowing up Nisha's arm, the other half now snaking quickly up the medic's blade, right for her fingers. Gera cast the knife aside before the creature could reach her hand, and Rollan kicked it over the ship's edge and into the sea.

Abeke felt ill—how many other creatures would become infected by that squirming shadow? How quickly would the evil spread?

Blood streamed from the wound in Nisha's arm. The dark shape beneath her skin continued upward, slower, but otherwise undeterred.

“Gera,” growled Arac. “There has to be something ...”

“It’s no use,” said the medic, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” breathed Nisha. “I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m okay.”

But the words sounded hollow, the repetitions of someone slipping into a fever. How long would she last? And if—*when*, realized Abeke with horror—she fell victim, could she ever find her way back? If—*when*—they defeated Zerif and stopped the mysterious Wyrn, what would happen to those who’d already fallen? Was there hope?

Arac swept the captain into his arms and set off toward the steps down into the ship’s hold, leaving behind only a trail of seawater from Nisha’s clothes. Abeke looked down at the nearest puddle and saw a drop of blood swirling in the middle of the salty stain. She watched the red twist and spread, feeling helpless and scared and desperate to reach Stetriol, to do something instead of watch those she cared about suffer. Her body tensed. Her stomach turned.

And then Abeke felt Rollan take her hand. The two stood there, as motionless as the rest of the crew on the rocking deck.

“We have to stop this,” she whispered.

“We will,” said Rollan, his voice laced with fear, but also grim determination.

The Greencloaks stood vigil on the deck for several long minutes before Arac reemerged, looking pale. A streak of his wife’s blood stained his sleeve.

“She’s resting,” he announced distantly. He was standing there among them, but Abeke could tell that his thoughts were still belowdecks, with Nisha. “She’s strong,” he added, lower. “She’s a fighter.” He blinked a few times—focused, glared, straightened. “What are you all standing around for? Get this ship back on course!”

“Sir,” said a short, balding Greencloak as Arac turned away. “What should we do about the second whale?”

Arac looked back and shook his head.

“Cut it loose,” he grumbled. “It can’t pull the ship alone. They work in pairs. One’s no good without the other.”



THE LEFT PATH

THEY KEPT CONOR IN THE MIDDLE.

It was the only way to keep him from falling behind, and the only way to keep Meilin herself from falling over, since when he was at the back of the pack she kept looking over her shoulder to check on him, until she inevitably stumbled on a root or a rock. She had the scuffed palms and bruised knees to show for it.

But it was more than that.

With Conor holding the torchlight in front of her—Xanthe didn't want it in her eyes, said it was too "red bright," whatever that meant—Meilin could watch his movements. She kept track of when his legs began to drag, when his body began to sway. The fact was, if *he* wouldn't tell them when he was tired, she'd have to do it herself. Meilin knew he was afraid of slowing them down. He murmured as much when he was curled up between Jhi and Briggan, sick with fever and fatigue. But she wasn't going to speed up, not if it meant losing him.

Meilin would keep Conor with them, keep him *Conor*, for as long as she could.

For as long as she had to.

Behind her, Takoda and Kovo signed messages to one another in eerie silence. Meilin didn't like having the ape where she couldn't watch him, but this stretch of tunnel was narrow, and if he went ahead, his wall of black fur blocked out the light. Meanwhile, up at the front of the group, Xanthe was humming.

It was a strange tune that got picked up not only by the rock walls, but by the moss and mushrooms and the shallow pools as well, carrying through the tunnels like a gust of air. Now and then there were words in the song, words in a language Meilin didn't know. It made her think of the creature that whispered in her dreams. She wondered if the words were muffled, as they'd seemed, or if they were another language. One as old as the rustling of leaves and the rushing of water in a stream. One as old as the world itself.

Just then, as her thoughts were lost in deciphering dreams, something reached out and brushed Meilin's arm. She caught her breath and spun, slashing with her quarterstaff and pinning the attacker back, before she realized that it wasn't an attacker at all, only a tendril of root that had come loose from the tunnel ceiling.

Meilin let out a shuddering breath.

"You show that tree," said Takoda with a mock frown.

Meilin scowled back, then realized he was mimicking her. Kovo snorted. Xanthe chuckled, and even Conor managed a weak smile. Meilin blew her hair out of her eyes. Too long underground. It was making her paranoid. She lowered her quarterstaff and stepped up closer to examine the offending root.

The ropy strand was thicker than any of the ones she'd seen so far. Once, they'd been little more than thin cords that ran like cracks in the ceiling overhead. Now some roots were as thick as her wrist, others as big as her upper arm. And up close, she could see that the root—all the roots—were *moving*. Not quickly, but not as slowly as stars either. They moved like a body shifting in sleep, loosing fragments of earth and rock with every small twist and turn.

The sound of crumbling stones was eerie, like skittering feet, and Meilin found herself wishing that Xanthe would start humming again—anything to distract from the feeling that they were not only underneath the earth, but inside a living thing. A dying thing.

Meilin shuddered and turned back to find that the group had stopped. At first she thought they were waiting for her. Then she realized, with a flicker of annoyance, they were waiting for *Xanthe*, who'd paused up ahead. Meilin frowned. The only thing she disliked more than not

leading was not being *able* to lead. She hated that she didn't know this underground world, that all she could do was follow.

Up ahead of Xanthe, the tunnel branched suddenly into two identical paths. At least, they looked identical to Meilin. She watched as the girl closed her eyes and brought her pale fingertips to the stone divide between the tunnels. What could she tell, just by touching the wall? Meilin had seen her do this a dozen times, had even tried to mimic it, pressing her hand to the rocks now and then, but she never felt anything except the cold damp of the cave.

But Xanthe must have felt something, because a moment later, her hand fell away and her pink eyes drifted open. She didn't speak, though. Her pale face remained contorted with concentration as she tipped her head from side to side, trying to process what she'd learned.

"Well?" prompted Meilin.

"It's strange," said Xanthe. "But both paths lead where we are going, in the end ... " She trailed off in a way that made Meilin think there was something she wasn't saying.

"So what's the difference?" asked Meilin, but Xanthe didn't answer. She was already plunging into the tunnel on the left, and the group had no choice but to follow her into the dark.

It was an easy road compared to the ones they'd taken so far, a gentle slope with weedy yellow mushrooms sprouting from the seam where the curved walls met the floor. Like many of the fungi here in Sadre, the tops glowed faintly with their own internal light, not enough to see by, just enough to stand out against the surrounding rock, the way clouds did sometimes when the moon was bright.

Xanthe led the way, not even bothering to look back. That prickle of annoyance began to rise in Meilin again at the thought of being helpless. She couldn't cure Conor. She couldn't find the Evertree's roots. But then she felt Jhi's touch, like a paw against the center of her back, and she remembered something her father had told her years before, when Meilin said she wanted to be like him, a warrior.

"What kind of warrior?" he'd asked.

"The kind that leads," she'd answered proudly.

"Then first you will learn to be a foot soldier."

Needless to say, Meilin had not been pleased. “But I want to be a *leader*,” she’d insisted, as if he’d misunderstood her answer.

“That may be,” he’d said, “but a true leader knows when to follow.”

Meilin straightened and stared at Xanthe, who walked ahead like a pale, wavering flame in the dark. Solitary.

Alone, thought Meilin.

With Phos Astos gone, Xanthe was alone. No family. No spirit animal. And yet, the girl hadn’t stopped to mourn, hadn’t hesitated. Even after she found out about Conor, she was still here, still helping. Maybe she needed this mission as much as any of them. After all, her world was in danger, too.

What they had to do was more important than either one of them, and if they were going to succeed, they would need to work together. And if that meant Meilin needed to follow instead of lead, then all right.

Besides, thought Meilin with a grim smile, *Xanthe may be the one who gets us to the Wyrms in one piece, but once we’re there, I’ll be the one to defeat it.*

“Hey, there’s light up ahead,” called Takoda.

Meilin blinked, dragging herself out of the bright world of memory and back into the darkened tunnel.

Jhi’s touch faded from her mind, replaced by a quickening pulse.

Takoda was right. Light was beginning to dance on the cave walls ahead, low and flickering. It was faint, so faint that the old Meilin wouldn’t have noticed it. Even if her muscles were stiff from lack of training, the weeks beneath the earth were sharpening her sight.

“I can hear water,” murmured Conor.

“Maybe there’s a village,” added Meilin, thinking how nice it would be to see new faces. To eat something that looked like food, and sleep on something that wasn’t stone. She chided herself. She’d never been a soft girl, had always been able to hold her own with the soldiers, but what she wouldn’t give right now for a bath, a bed.

“There’s no village this way,” said Xanthe, her voice tense. “The glow must be coming from stone moss and river fern ...”

“Do you hear that?” asked Takoda from just behind Meilin.

“The water?” prompted Conor.

“No,” said Takoda. “There’s something else.”

And when Meilin strained to hear over the slosh and burble, she heard it, too, though she didn’t know what it was. The skittering of loose pebbles? The shuffle of steps?

Briggan’s ears twitched, and his lips curled in warning, his wolfish blue eyes bright. Conor’s torchlight snagged on something on the wall. Meilin reached out and brushed her fingers over the damp surface. The rock was softer here, and strangely grooved. She fit her fingertips to the lines and traced their course, and then recoiled as she realized how easily her nails had fit the grooves.

The ground was getting slicker, too. When she looked down, she noticed that it was a mess of crushed yellow mushrooms, trampled underfoot. Though Conor and Xanthe had been walking ahead of her, Meilin knew they hadn’t done this damage, not alone. This was the work of dozens of feet, maybe more.

“You guys,” she murmured. “Something isn’t—”

Xanthe’s breath caught audibly in her throat. She’d nearly reached the mouth of the tunnel when she froze. When the others caught up and saw what she saw, a sickly silence settled over them.

The mouth of the cave opened into the wall of a large cavern. Spikes of rock—stalagmites and stalactites—juttied up from ground and down from ceiling, transforming the cavern into a gaping mouth with flashing rows of sharpened teeth.

But it wasn’t the illusion of a predator’s fangs that stopped them cold.

It was what waited beyond them. Because there, behind the wall of spiking teeth, were the Many.

Tens.

Hundreds.

A writhing mass of bodies, pale and wormy and marked by black pulsing spirals. As thick as rats on a sewer floor.

Conor gasped and tossed the torchlight back into the tunnel behind them as if burned, plunging them into shadow an instant before one of the creatures looked up. Its milky eyes panned across the cavern walls. Meilin’s heart pounded as its gaze brushed across them like a chill.

“*Don’t move,*” whispered Xanthe. The order passed back through the ranks like an echo.

Look away, thought Meilin to the creature. *Look away. Look away.*

But the creature was at the edge of the tangled horde, and *something* had caught its attention. It stared, fixated, up at them, its face blank, eyes unblinking. Meilin wished Xanthe weren’t at the front of the pack, with her skin so pale it caught every flicker of light.

Meilin’s fingers tightened on her quarterstaff.

It was a ten-foot drop from their perch at the mouth of the tunnel into the cavern’s jaws below, and Meilin could see the marks in the mud where the bodies of the Many had slipped and slid. The slope was so steep it would be almost impossible for one to climb back up. But Meilin didn’t think the Many cared about impossible. She could picture the creatures clambering toward them anyway, with their empty eyes and their mindless, tireless pursuit. Could picture them climbing over and on top of each other, turning bodies into stairs until they reached the tunnel.

Beside Meilin, Conor shuddered. It was a small, involuntary motion, but the creature below cocked its head and took a shuffling step forward. Its hand drifted up through the air, the gesture in slow motion, as if the limb were underwater. But as it opened its mouth, another pale form jostled it from behind.

Just like that, the spell was broken.

The creature spun on its assailant, and the two went down in a shuffling mess of limbs. No one tried to pull them apart. No one even noticed. Within moments, their bodies were swallowed up by the rest of the Many, who walked right over them as if they were rocks.

Up in the tunnel, Xanthe braved a single step backward, the others moving with her, inching away from the edge, and the flickering light, and the mass of pale limbs and teeth. Only once they’d all edged back to the discarded torch did they *run*.

Back past the trampled mushrooms and the claw marks on the wall, back through the winding tunnel, back to the chamber where the two paths split, and they’d chosen left.

They stood in a circle, breathless.

Meilin’s fingers ached from clutching her staff.

All the color had drained from Conor's face, though she didn't know if it was from fatigue or the sight of the terrible creatures with the spirals in their skin.

Kovo glared back down the tunnel, his red eyes narrowed on the dark.

Takoda had a hand on Xanthe's shoulder. The girl's narrow arms were wrapped around herself.

"Okay, new plan," said Meilin, "we take the other path."

Takoda and Conor nodded, but, if it was possible, Xanthe's pale skin got even whiter. Her pink eyes widened.

"What's wrong?" pressed Meilin. "You said they both lead to where we're going."

"They do," said Xanthe slowly. "But *that* ..." she said, pointing to the left route, the one they'd chosen, the one filled with the Many, "... was the *easy* path."

Meilin swallowed, and looked to the divide. The other path spiraled away into darkness.

They had no choice, but the question hung unspoken in the air, as heavy as smoke.

If the left path was supposed to be the easy one, then what could possibly be waiting for them on the right?



STETRIOL'S WELCOME

“**L** AND!”
The call went up just before noon.

The *Tellun's Pride II* had been slowed by the loss of its whales but was spurred forward by a strong current and a merciful wind behind its sails.

Now Stetriol loomed, growing larger and closer by the minute. Abeke had never seen the capital before, didn't know what it had looked like during the time of the Bile and the Conquerors, but she'd heard stories, and she could tell from the energy that this was a new world. And hopefully a better one.

Abeke clutched a slip of paper. Word had arrived from Greenhaven that morning, written in Olvan's hand but bound to a messenger bird with Lenori's yellow ribbon. According to the healer at the Evertree, their friends were still alive somewhere beneath its roots. That was all she could say.

Stay strong, Olvan had instructed. Focus on your mission.

Arac stood at the ship's bow, calling out orders while Nisha leaned against the mast, ill but upright. Word was her husband had tried to keep her in her cabin, and she'd given him a verbal lashing. The sounds of the fight had rung out through the ship, most of the words lost, but the meaning known: Nisha would be captain until the moment the sickness took her. And staying cooped up in her cabin would do nothing to slow its course.

Her parrot, Relis, sat on her shoulder, its rainbow feathers flustered and its black eyes heavy, knowing. Would the parrot stay with the captain until the end? What then? Nisha's dark arms, lean but strong, were bare beneath her cloak. Abeke saw shallow cuts running up her right arm like notches in a tree. Gera, the medic, had obviously tried to stop the parasite's progress, tried to cut it from the captain's skin. In the end, she'd only bought Nisha a little time—Abeke saw the trace of the black spiral already against the base of the captain's throat. Nisha was holding on, but Abeke could tell she was losing the fight. Slowly, yes, but faster than Conor. Too much of the parasite had escaped the medic's blade. Sweat beaded on her brow, and her once radiant skin had taken on a sickly pallor.

How can something so small do so much damage? marveled Abeke sadly.

But of course, she knew. Not all enemies were large.

Back in Nilo, she had seen a man die of infection.

He'd been wounded on a hunt, not badly, barely a graze along his calf. The cut was so shallow that no one even thought to treat it. Besides, he was one of the strongest men in her village, strong as an ox, an elk, a tiger. He was a tree, a mountain, and he laughed off the small cut, called it a bug bite, a splinter, a nick.

But the night after he was injured, the man trod through a puddle of stagnant water, and by morning, the line was angry and red, the skin hot to the touch. Still he waved away the ministrations of their healers. By the third day, vicious red lines wove up his leg from the cut, now infected. And by the fourth, the sickness was in his blood.

Such a small wound—a nick—had felled a mountain of a man.

“You ready?” asked Rollan, appearing beside her. He'd followed her gaze and must have thought she was looking at the approaching city, not the captain before it.

Abeke nodded as the ship entered the port.

Stetriol's docks were alive with motion and noise. Up and down their length, sailors called out, men traded words and wares, and carts moved crates. Abeke saw two other ships with Greencloak flags, and mixed among them were ferries from Zhong and Eura, and even one from as far

as Amaya. In the bay, a handful of whales and dolphins and rays swam in circles, and on the docks she saw horses, cats, and dogs, some with the focused gaze of spirit animals and others the more docile look of pets. Calls went up, and ropes were flung onto the docks, caught by workers who helped to haul the *Tellun's Pride II* into its berth.

Arac and Nisha were quarreling again in hushed tones. Abeke tried not to overhear, but Rollan was obviously making no such attempt, because he leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“Arac wants Nisha to go ashore for help. And Nisha refuses to leave the ship. So Arac says he’ll stay with her, and she says he’s to go ahead with us, and—”

At that point in the conversation, Arac stormed away, muttering curses and kicking a crate. Nisha glared after him, then sank back against the mast, looking exhausted.

Word of their arrival had landed ahead of them, and many people were gathering around the docks. Abeke could feel Rollan tense beside her, donning his own hostility like armor against an impending fight. But there was no malice in the people’s faces that she could see. No distrust. Only curiosity, and here and there, even a smile of delight. And throughout the crowd, the first traces of spirit animals bonded without Bile. A girl held a blue-eyed cat close to her chest. A boy cupped a turtle in his hands.

Things change, Abeke reminded herself. And we are part of that change.

Half a dozen Greencloaks stood waiting on the docks, their crisp mantles shining emerald in the midday sun. Tattoos peeked over collars and out of cuffs, and a green-eyed lemur sat on one man’s shoulder, a small dog beside another’s boot. Beside the Greencloaks, a second set of men and women, these dressed in blue and black, stood at equal attention. Silver pins with the serpentine *S* of Stetriol were fastened to several of their robes.

The sight of them all made Abeke aware of how grimy she was from her days at sea, her hair stiff from salt and her cloak dulled by rain. She wanted a bath, a bed, a night’s rest.

“Do you suddenly feel like we’ve done something wrong?” whispered Rollan, eyeing the Stetriolans’ poise, the Greencloaks’ stiff shoulders and high heads. They did have an almost military appearance, their backs to the growing crowd, their eyes trained on the ship.

But when the plank was lowered and Abeke and Rollan descended on the dock, two of the Greencloaks stepped forward and smiled.

“Abeke of Nilo,” announced the broad-shouldered man with the lemur on his shoulder. “Bond of Uraza.”

“Rollan of Amaya,” announced the other, a woman who looked like she could have taken the first in a fight. A tattoo of salamander curled around her neck. “Bond of Essix.”

As if on cue, the gyrfalcon screeched overhead, before sweeping down to land majestically on Rollan’s shoulder.

The crowd gasped and cheered with approval, even though Abeke doubted the stunt was planned. Essix just liked to show off. *A bit like her human*, thought Abeke as Rollan preened.

She thought of summoning Uraza for the same effect (even though the leopard was more intimidating than the falcon), but something caught her eye.

A flash of red in the crowd, not burnt brick or dusty orange, but *crimson*.

Her heart started to race, and she glanced at Rollan to see if he had noticed. But it must have been a trick of the light, because when she looked again, the slice of red was gone.

“Stetriol welcomes such honored guests,” said one of the men in blue and black, a lean figure with a trimmed goatee. “If you’ll follow us ...”



Abeke was glad to be back on land.

The crowd parted around them as they passed. Rollan was tense beside her, but even his eyes were wide at the sight of Stetriol—not only the city’s appearance, but the *air*. There was a new energy here. In their brief journey through the region before, Stetriol had felt a bit like clothes weighed down by rain. Now, there was a lightness, a buoyancy. Abeke

wanted to take in all the changes, but the procession pressed on too fast. Her glimpses of the city were too fleeting.

But even in fleeting glimpses, the change was startling. The Greencloaks had obviously helped import supplies, because everywhere she looked, she saw new construction, old buildings being repaired and new ones being raised. And it wasn't just the buildings. Everywhere she looked, the kingdom was *flowering*. From the potted plants on sills to the lilies floating in the squares' fountains, to the vines climbing the stone walls of courtyards. It looked like a city waking from a long sleep, and Abeke was happy to see it thrive.

For so long, Stetriol had been a place of sickness and anger.

And as easy as it was to hate the kingdom and the Conquerors for what they'd done, Abeke couldn't blame them for doing it. The First Devourer War was many years ago, but its aftermath had stretched on, forcing people to pay for the crimes of their ancestors. Erdas had isolated Stetriol, kept from them the Nectar, let their people suffer bonding sickness and the desperation it brought with it.

People in that position had only two options: die, or fight back.

Could she blame them, for wanting to survive?

If the strain on her bond with Uraza was anything like the sickness the children of Stetriol had felt, could she blame them for wanting a cure?

Not that she could say any of that to Rollan.

Not when Rollan had nearly lost his mother to the Conquerors' Bile.

Not when Abeke had been the one to first trust Shane.

But she wanted to move forward.

"Where are we going?" asked Abeke as the docks fell away behind them and the streets passed in a blur.

The Greencloak ahead of her—the woman with the salamander tattoo—glanced back. "To the castle," she said.

"The castle?" asked Abeke, startled. Stetriol was a kingdom, of course, but it was one without a king. The throne—*Shane's* throne—sat empty.

"The Greencloaks have taken up post in the castle," explained the broad-shouldered man with the lemur, whose name was Bern, "since it is

currently ... unoccupied.”

“We share it with the Council of Stetriol,” added the woman, Ela. “One of whom, Ernol, greeted you on the docks.” She nodded at the slim man with the goatee who was now part of their procession. “It was part of the agreement for rebuilding this city.”

“So Shane is no longer the rightful king?” asked Abeke, earning herself a warning glance from Rollan.

“Shane is a fugitive,” countered the councilman, Ernol. “He is not *here*, and in the absence of a king, rightful or not, order must be maintained. The royal family did not have the best reputation when it came to diplomacy. But this is a promising direction.”

The castle loomed ahead of them, and trumpets sounded as the gates fell open onto a bustling courtyard. Essix bristled at the noise and took wing. Their procession dissolved, half the Greencloaks peeling away to other tasks, along with several of the locals.

“Which Great Beast do you think was summoned?” asked Rollan as they crossed the courtyard, ushered on by the pared-down huddle of green and blue cloaks. “I’m betting Mulop the Octopus. Or maybe Cabaro the Lion.”

Abeke hoisted her satchel higher on her shoulder. “I think we’re about to find out.”

The castle sat on a rise in the middle of the city. Abeke paused at the top of the steps and turned to look out at Stetriol. From here she could see the sweep of tiled roofs, the maze of streets, and, in the distance, *trees*. Along a battered stretch of the city—the buildings reduced to rubble and scorched earth—they’d cleared away the damage and planted trees. Young saplings, none above her knee, but she watched men and women, some in green and others in brown and blue and yellow, planting row upon row of trees.

Abeke’s spirits rose at the sight of Greencloaks and locals working together, at the sight of the new growth, and she turned to tell Rollan. But he wasn’t there.

The rest of the procession had already gone in, and she found Rollan standing in the castle’s entry hall, staring up at a portrait on the wall. Most of the old decorations had been cleared away, exposing the bare

stone beneath, but the portrait hung there, one of the only relics of the past.

In it, a girl sat proudly in a chair, a boy at her shoulder. They had the same blond hair, the same sharp eyes, and Abeke recognized them instantly. Even without her Bile-bonded spider, Iskos, Abeke knew the girl was Drina. Royal. *Conqueror*. And Shane's older sister. Shane himself stood at Drina's shoulder, his painted blue eyes looking down at Abeke.

"Why is this still up?" asked Rollan, an edge in his voice.

"A reminder," said Bern. "It doesn't do to pretend the past didn't happen. We can't erase it. We can only try to overcome it."

With that, they were led through the castle halls to a grand room, where a girl was perched on a chair, reading a book, as if she were sitting alone in a library and not on display in a castle. Men and women in blue and black Stetriolan robes—each with the *S* pin of the council—gathered around her as if she were a work of art, a priceless artifact. She looked up when they came in, closed her book, and smiled. The brightness of her smile was matched only by her halo of white-blond hair, which was wound around her head in a braid. Her eyes were sapphire blue, and there was something about the girl that reminded Abeke of Conor—of the way he radiated warmth.

"This is Tasha," said Ernol, going to stand at the girl's shoulder.

"Hello," she said brightly, sitting forward. "You must be Abeke, the brave," she added with a nod. "And you must be Rollan, the fierce." Rollan puffed up at the title, and Abeke almost snorted with laughter. "I've heard so much about you both."

She rose from the chair, looking picturesque, graceful. Right up until she took a step forward and tripped on the corner of her own skirt. The girl gasped and stumbled, knocking into a table with a glass vase before one of the Stetriolan nobles shot a hand out to steady her. None of the councilmembers were fast enough to save the vase, but Bern's lemur appeared, catching the glass before it hit the floor.

Tasha straightened and flashed a shy, embarrassed smile. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Definitely Mulop," whispered Rollan.

Abeke elbowed him in the side.

“Tasha,” said Ernol patiently. “Will you show our guests your spirit animal?”

The girl nodded and slid up her sleeve to reveal her tattoo. Abeke’s breath caught. Running the length of Tasha’s forearm was a swan, its wings spread, as if about to land, or about to rise. Its long, elegant neck was curved into an *S*.

And then, in a flash of light, the mark was gone, its white feathers glowing in the light.

Ninani the Swan.

A reverent silence fell over the room as the Greencloaks bowed their heads and the Stetriolans brought their hands to their chests in reverence.

“No way,” whispered Rollan.

The girls’ parents—they had the same startlingly light hair, the same bright eyes—stood behind Tasha’s chair. Both watched their daughter with pride, and an awe bordering on fear.

It was a sentiment Abeke didn’t wholly understand. Her own father had not been happy when she’d summoned Uraza. He’d seen her gift—and the responsibility that came with it—as a burden on him and his village. Abeke had eventually come to terms with her family, but she knew she’d never see such a look in her father’s eyes.

Tasha’s face, however, was an open book, showing only joy. And why shouldn’t she be happy? Summoning a spirit animal in Stetriol had for so long been a curse, the bonding sickness driving its victims mad. It was only recently a blessing, and a rare one.

And Tasha had not only summoned a spirit animal, but a Great Beast.

And not just any Great Beast, but *Ninani*.

The giver of Nectar, so long withheld from Stetriol. It was a symbol of new beginnings. How could they see it any other way?

The swan craned her head and considered her audience with stately grace, her onyx eyes settling on Abeke and Rollan. And then, in a flash of light, she was gone again, returned to Tasha’s fair skin as an elegant pattern of feathers and the *S*-curve of a swan’s neck.

The gathered men and women, nobles and Greencloaks, stood for a moment in silence. And then Rollan spoke.

“How many know?” he asked.

“We have kept it secret,” said the Greencloak, Bern, at the same moment the Stetriolan councilman, Ernol, said, “Word is spreading.”

Abeke’s stomach turned as the two men looked at each other, horrified.

“How many have you told?” snapped Bern.

“The city deserves to know,” retorted Ernol.

“We told you it *wasn’t safe*—”

“We haven’t gone shouting it through the streets—” cut in one of the other nobles.

“But the people *will* find out,” insisted Ernol, “whether we tell them or not.” Abeke watched the volley of words, and then looked at Tasha, who stood between them, confused.

“Then let them find out after she’s *safely away*,” said Bern.

“Away?” Tasha finally cut in, eyes wide with distress. Abeke realized with horror that the girl didn’t know she was in danger, didn’t know they’d come to take her back to Greenhaven. Away from her home, from her family, from her world. She’d only just discovered the joys of summoning a Great Beast.

She’d yet to learn the cost.

“Tasha,” said Abeke gently, stepping forward. “You cannot stay here.”

The girl’s smile wavered. “What do you mean? This is my home.”

“It’s not safe here,” added Rollan.

Ernol bristled. “Stetriol is—”

“This has nothing to do with Stetriol,” cut in Rollan. “Zerif is hunting down all those who summon the Great Beasts. Once he learns you have Ninani, he will come. We’ve already lost too many allies—too many friends—to his attacks. We’ve come to take you with us, back to Greenhaven.”

“Such a gift comes to our country,” said one of the nobles, “and you want to take it away?”

“We want to protect all of Erdas!” snapped Rollan. A rumble went through the gathered men and women at that. For a very long time, Erdas

had disowned Stetriol. “The Great Beasts may bond with one person,” he continued, “but they don’t belong to one nation.”

“We cannot force you to come with us,” said Abeke, her attention still focused on Tasha, “but staying here is not only a danger to yourself, but to your city. Plus, you belong with us. Your strength is needed.”

Though the news clearly took the girl by surprise, to her credit, she didn’t cry. She looked around the room, from the Stetriolan nobles to the gathered Greencloaks to her parents. Her mouth opened, and then closed. “Can I . . . ” she started, stopped, began again, “can I have some time to think?”

Abeke and Rollan exchanged looks, but Bern spoke up. “It will take two days to get the ship restocked and set for sail.”

Tasha swallowed and sank back into her chair. She seemed so young, caught between the Greencloaks on one side and the Stetriolans on the other. Ninani may be all grace, but Tasha was all limbs, sharp elbows and bony knees, stretched out in a way she clearly hadn’t grown into yet.

“Then I have two days to decide,” she said. Rollan looked about to argue, but Abeke caught his arm. They could not force the matter. It had to be her choice.

Ernol spoke up, stepping in front of Tasha. “No one is going anywhere today.” Behind him, she saw Tasha’s family fold like wings around the girl. “You both must be weary,” he said, addressing Abeke and Rollan. “Come, let me show you to your rooms.”



Abeke sat in a large tub, scrubbing the salt and sea grime from her skin and wondering what they were supposed to do if Tasha refused to go with them to Greenhaven. When she was done—with the bathing, not the wondering—she found her own cloak was gone. A fresh one, dazzling green, lay folded on her bed. A tray of hot food sat on the table beside it, and Abeke wondered if this was what it felt like to be a royal. She took an apple from the tray, its skin the vivid green of fresh grass.

She and Rollan had both been given elegant rooms in the southern wing of the castle—the castle itself had been divided into north, south, east, and west. The Greencloaks occupied the north and south wings,

while the members of the council, a few noble families, and what was left of the royals (a few cousins of Shane's family, mostly), took the east and west. It was strange, thought Abeke, that no one had tried to claim the throne in Shane's absence. Even though Bern had said it was a relic, what with the council in power, she couldn't help but feel like they'd left it empty on purpose. As if they were waiting for their young king to come home.

Abeke leaned her elbows on the window. Her room looked out not onto the city but into the castle grounds and a garden far below. Feeling suddenly restless, she decided to go exploring, in the hopes that a walk through the grounds would do more to clear her head than the bath had.

The sun was setting as she made her way down the stairs toward the gardens. She was nearly there, her mouth full of tart apple, when she almost collided with a boy.

The sight of him made her choke.

The boy—a noble, judging by his clothes—could have been Shane's younger brother. He had the same fair hair, the same slight build, the same intense eyes. The only difference was his mouth. Where Shane's had so often drawn into a smile, especially in those early days—they were, after all, friends before they were enemies—the boy's mouth was a stern line, his eyes hawkish and sharp.

And he wasn't alone.

A small ginger cat, little bigger than a kitten, danced around the boy's legs. Abeke could tell—maybe by the boy's feline grace, or the way they moved in sync—that they were bonded.

Without the Nectar or the Bile, children were bonding naturally. It was becoming even rarer to have a spirit animal, but Stetriol was no longer cut off from the gift.

"Sorry," mumbled the boy, eyes darting over her cloak and face and skin.

"It's okay," said Abeke. "What's your name?"

"James," said the boy.

"And this?" asked Abeke, crouching. "Is she your spirit animal?"

"*He*," corrected the boy, "is Barnabas."

“Hello, Barnabas,” said Abeke, scratching the kitten’s ears. He purred against her palm.

“Do *you* have a spirit animal?” asked James, though the green of her cloak meant she obviously did.

“Maybe,” she said with a crooked smile.

“Let me see,” said the boy imperiously.

Abeke grinned, and then released Uraza.

The boy had the decency to look surprised, staggering back as the massive golden leopard sprang into being, paws landing heavily on the stone floor. James’s mouth fell into an O as the big cat, who was nearly as tall as he was, yawned, exposing long, sharp teeth.

When Uraza bowed her head to consider the tiny cat, Barnabas had the audacity to swat a small paw at the leopard’s face. It was roughly the size of her nostril. Uraza watched patiently, even tolerating the cat’s tinny meow, before she finally opened her mouth and plucked the ginger cat up by his scruff.

Barnabas swung indignantly from Uraza’s teeth, and the boy stamped his foot and ordered that the leopard put him down *at once*.

Uraza glanced at Abeke, an amused glint in her violet eyes. Then she dropped the ginger kitten with a plunk and padded away toward the grounds.

Abeke rushed after, trailing the leopard through an archway and into the castle gardens. They were larger than they looked from above, filled with the kind of maze-like greenery that swallowed you up, got you turned around.

Abeke strolled while the setting sun drew long shadows, and the sounds of the castle and the city beyond began to shift, soften.

There was something wild about this place. She could tell that the gardens had once been groomed, but they’d long overgrown their boundaries. Hedges and low divides interrupted the greens. Some were ordinary bushes, but others were strange, bulbous things. She reached out to touch the nearest bush and was surprised when her fingers went through the layer of leaves and into something beneath.

When she pulled aside the viney cover, she realized it wasn’t a dense plant at all, but a layer of ivy covering the remains of a cage, the old iron

warped and broken and swallowed up by green. Abeke glanced around the garden.

How many of these hedges held other things?

Bern's green-eyed lemur sat on a windowsill halfway up the garden wall, and Essix soared in broad circles overhead. Uraza was obviously happy to be free, and began to prowl around the garden, startling anyone she came across. A noble gave a cry of surprise, and Abeke called the cat back toward her. Uraza didn't come, but Abeke could hear her still prowling through the greenery, hunting small game. Hopefully no one had summoned any small woodland creatures and left them to wander the gardens. When the cat finally reappeared, Abeke was relieved to see that her mouth and paws were clean.

Abeke yawned. She didn't realize it was getting dark, not until the sun dipped behind the castle walls, plunging the courtyard into an early twilight.

She was just about head inside when something caught her attention.

Her senses prickled, the way they did when she was being watched.

Abeke scanned the darkening grounds, and then Uraza let out a low growl, and Abeke's eyes tracked up the garden wall and landed on the figure perched on top. He stood, leaning almost lazily against the place where the garden wall met the side of the castle. He'd be hard to notice in the fading light, but Abeke felt her eyes focus with Uraza's keen sight. She could see him clearly, from the sweep of his red cloak to the silvery wood of his featureless mask.

The last time they'd crossed paths, it had been in the middle of a battle, all chaos.

Now, the world was still.

They stood there, staring at one another, her conversation with Olvan echoing in her head.

He helped us.

Yet he conceals his face.

There was something so ... familiar about the figure. Which was impossible, she knew. He was covered head to toe, every inch hidden from view except the faintest glint of pale eyes, and in them, recognition.

Abeke opened her mouth, but the boy held a finger to the lips of his mask. A second later she heard Rollan's voice from the archway at the edge of the garden, calling her inside. She heard his steps coming down the path and looked away, only for an instant, but by the time she glanced back at the wall, the stranger was gone.



THE ARACHANE FIELDS

“THERE’S A SAYING AT MY MONASTERY,” SAID TAKODA AS they made their way down the path on the right. “It goes, ‘There are no easy roads in life. There are no hard ones either. There are only the paths we choose to take, and the places they lead us.’ ”

“Oh, yeah?” countered Meilin. “What about when you choose one path, but it’s full of white-eyed monsters and so you have to double back and take the other road? Is there a saying about that?”

Takoda winced. Meilin knew she was being harsh, but they’d been traveling down the second path for more than an hour, nerves tightening with every passing moment. They’d yet to come upon more of the Many, or a cyrix nest, or anything else that might want to eat them, but Xanthe’s warning at the entryway had them all a bit wound up.

All except for Kovo, who lumbered along with his usual impassive glare. But when it was obvious that Meilin had hurt Takoda’s feelings, the ape signed a word that she didn’t know. She wouldn’t have paid it much attention, if he hadn’t signed this word at her *several times* so far on their trip—pulling his hand in a gesture over his face.

Finally she asked Takoda to translate. The boy shuffled his feet.

“Um ... ” he said. “It means ‘cranky.’ ”

Xanthe cracked a laugh, and Meilin felt her face go hot. “I’m sorry, the ape who got us trapped under the world is calling me *cranky*?”

In response, Kovo's red eyes found hers. He made the gesture again, slowly enough for her to follow. Meilin raised her staff. Kovo bared his teeth. Takoda chuckled.

"He doesn't mean anything by it," said the boy, waving his hands. "I think he might just be using it as your name."

"My name," growled Meilin, "is not *Cranky*. It's *Mei-lin*."

"If it's any consolation," offered Takoda, "he calls Xanthe *Pale Girl*." The monk ran two fingers along his forearm to show the sign for *pale girl*.

"That's because she *is* a pale girl!" snapped Meilin. "What does he call *you*? Skinny monk?"

"Um ..." Takoda hesitated, looking to the ape. "Nothing, really. Most of the time he just shoves me."

Kovo lifted his massive hands and Takoda flinched, as if bracing for another shove, but the ape didn't push him. Instead he brought his furry hands up before his red eyes and linked his two forefingers.

Even in the flickering torchlight, Meilin could see Takoda go red.

"What?" she prompted. "What does that mean?"

Takoda smiled shyly. "It means 'friend,' " he translated. Adding, as Kovo made another gesture, " '*little* friend.' "

Xanthe broke into a warm grin. "Aw, that's sweet."

But Meilin rolled her eyes. "Oh, of course," she said, "you get the nice name."

Takoda wasn't paying attention. He was busy signing back to Kovo, linking his fingers, then spreading his arms wide. *Big friend*.

"What does he call me?" asked Conor, his voice soft.

Takoda shot a look at Kovo. The ape hesitated, then curled his hand into a fist, pressed it to his throat, and drew the fist down toward his stomach.

"What does that mean?" asked Conor when Takoda didn't translate.

"Cursed," whispered the boy at last.

Conor swallowed. "Oh."

Briggan growled at the ape. Kovo didn't even flinch.

"Do you hear that?" asked Xanthe. At first Meilin thought the girl was just trying to break the tension, but then she listened and heard it,

too. The sound was almost musical, like wind chimes, or the faint plucking of harp strings.

“What *is* that?” she asked, entranced.

“I don’t know,” said Xanthe honestly.

“Well,” said Conor, “we’re going to find out.”

Up ahead, the tunnel path became narrow and steep, the ground plunging away every few feet, as if they were descending a set of massive stone stairs, each half as tall as Meilin herself.

At the bottom of the steps there stood a kind of archway set into the rock wall. It was made of pale stone, only instead of two limbs, it had seven. It looked like at some point there had been eight, but one had crumbled away with time, and lay in broken pieces on the ground. The archway reminded Meilin of a weeping willow without a trunk, or—she thought with a chill—of the cage of roots in her dream.

Conor was the first one to step through the gateway—Meilin didn’t know if it was because he was tired of being coddled, or annoyed by Kovo’s nickname, or simply in a hurry to keep moving. As he passed Xanthe, Meilin saw the girl recoil slightly. Meilin glared, and when Xanthe’s pink eyes met hers, Xanthe had the decency to look down, ashamed.

Then Meilin heard Conor catch his breath and rushed through the doorway after him, expecting something horrible.

Instead, as she saw what he saw, her mouth fell open in wonder.

One by one, the others followed, and for a moment they all stood there, staring at the world they’d found beneath the earth.

Meilin had seen tunnels and caves and even the sprawling city of Phos Astos. She’d dreamed about the vaulting space beneath the Evertree. But so far, she’d never seen any place like this. The chamber was so vast, she forgot they were underground at all. It didn’t seem possible, when the opening stretched so wide she couldn’t see the walls, so high the roots and rock were lost in darkness.

So much of Sadre had been harsh edges and sharp stone, like the toothy rocks in the cavern with the Many. But here, everything was softness. Silvery curtains spilled down from somewhere high overhead, and though they were standing on a stone ledge, the floor ahead was

covered with delicate strands of light. An intricate network of lines, each shimmering with their own glow. Fields of silvery thread.

The music reached them now, clear as bells, and yet still somehow distant, as if the instrument weren't somewhere in the chamber before them, but all around, everywhere at once. And then Meilin realized that it *was*.

Because the fields themselves were singing.

A breeze blew through the chamber and strummed across the thousands of strings. Their vibrations drew out a faint but steady hum. The sound was eerie and enchanting. Meilin stood there, mesmerized and confused, because she didn't understand what she was looking at, how the floor could make music, how it could be so strange and beautiful. Less like earth than a thousand filaments of light. Like tiny rivers sparkling in the dark floor.

And then she understood.

They weren't lines of water set into the ground.

There wasn't even a ground to be set into.

The threads running together *were* the ground. Or rather, they were a *net*.

Like the nets in Phos Astos, the ones that caught them when they jumped.

But there were no currents of air to guide them, and the net was suspended over a hole so vast and deep it plummeted away into nothing.

And besides, what was a net doing here, in the middle of a cavern without any people?

And then Meilin's stomach turned. Because this net wasn't a net at all.

It was a *web*.

Meilin felt the color drain from her face. Beside her, Xanthe drew in a breath, but she didn't sound scared. Her pink eyes were wide with wonder.

"I know where we are," she whispered. "These are the Arachane Fields."

As if on cue, dozens of small forms as big as Meilin's hand began to crawl up through the spaces between the silver threads. Their bodies

glittered like jewels, and their legs—all eight of them—were as spindly as the silk they moved over.

Spider silk.

Meilin looked back at the arch they'd come through. Of course. It had eight legs. She swallowed. She wasn't afraid of many things. Not the dark, not even being buried alive—which was good, considering her current position—but she *did not like spiders*.

She felt herself backing away, retreating until her shoulders came up against something large and warm and covered in coarse hair. A low growl rumbled through the barricade behind her, and she craned her head to see Kovo's fangs. She scrambled forward, her foot nearly skimming the edge of the web.

"I've heard legends about this place," continued Xanthe, almost reverently. Meilin couldn't help but imagine what Rollan would say to that. Probably that legends were rarely told about happy places where nothing bad happened.

As if on cue, Conor said, "Good legends? The kind where everyone lives?"

Xanthe didn't answer that. Instead she said, "The legends say that the Arachane Fields are one of the three wards of protection around the Evertree. Their music is meant to guard the way against evil."

"And the spiders?" whispered Meilin.

Xanthe swallowed. "Well, if I had to guess, I'd say they're meant to catch anything the music doesn't. But as long as we're careful, they should let us pass."

"Should ..." echoed Conor.

"You said there were *three* wards of protection," added Takoda, whose eyes were fixed on the field.

Xanthe nodded. "The Arachane Fields guard the passage to the Sulfur Sea, and the Sulfur Sea runs like a moat around the Evertree. Beyond the sea ... Well, the legends get kind of murky, but—"

"One obstacle at a time," said Conor, straightening. "Once we get across the fields, we'll face the rest." Briggan stood tall beside him, ears back but head high, blue eyes trained on the fields ahead.

“There must be another way,” said Meilin, trying to keep the fear from her voice.

But Xanthe was already shaking her head. “There was another way, remember? It was filled with the Many.”

Meilin swallowed. She would rather take on a hundred of the Many than do this. She thought about suggesting it, but Conor’s fevered eyes and Xanthe’s set jaw made her hold her tongue.

Meilin’s stomach turned over as she scanned the expanse of threads, searching for an edge, some way around, and finding none. But then she noticed that here and there the threads wove together into plats. They weren’t as wide as footpaths, but they should hold the weight of four kids. Maybe even Briggan.

But there was *no way* the field would hold the weight of a massive ape.

Everyone seemed to reach the conclusion at the same time, because they turned back toward Kovo.

“Please,” said Takoda, linking his fingers in the sign for friend. Meilin had only seen the ape agree to take the passive form once, and he hadn’t been happy about it. Now his red eyes tracked over the field. Even the ape must have seen the predicament, because he snorted and brought his heavy hands down onto Takoda’s narrow shoulders, and in a flash of light, Kovo vanished, becoming a massive black tattoo that circled the boy’s neck and crept across his face. Meilin took a deep breath. The air felt lighter without the ape’s looming presence and weighted gaze.

Not that Kovo was the biggest of their problems right now.

Which was saying something.

Conor turned to Briggan, obviously wondering if he should invite the wolf into his passive form, but he hesitated. Boy and wolf met each other’s gazes for several long seconds. While Meilin didn’t know what passed between them, she saw Conor’s hand go to his shoulder, where the parasite was making its slow advance. Was he trying to protect Briggan from the disease? Or to protect the rest of them from *him*?

Whatever it was, the two seemed to reach a silent agreement, because Briggan and Conor looked away at the same time. “Let’s go,” he said,

starting toward the edge.

Meilin was right behind him. Xanthe reached out and took Takoda's hand. She squeezed it, and he squeezed back, and neither one let go.

"Stick to the heaviest ropes," Xanthe whispered to them all. "And watch out for the Webmother."

"What," hissed Meilin, spinning on the girl, "is the Webmother?"

Xanthe managed a nervous smile. "Don't worry," she said. "You'll know her if you see her."

"And if I see her?"

Xanthe bit her lip. "Run."

"Great," said Meilin and Conor at the same time. Even Briggan rumbled. For a long moment, none of them could bring themselves to go. The music played across the field, and the spiders moved along the strings, and it all seemed so delicate. And so dangerous. Like the slightest motion would upset it all.

"Come on," said Xanthe at last, letting go of Takoda's hand. She took a deep breath and set her foot on the thickest strand, testing its weight. It held, and she stepped out onto the cord. The music in the chamber changed ever so slightly with her weight, the resonance shifting a fraction—no, half an octave—lower.

"It's solid," said Xanthe, hands out to her sides for balance.

Takoda went next, taking a strand to Xanthe's right. Briggan sniffed at the cords before padding out onto a third, followed by Conor.

At last, Meilin stepped onto the web. She expected to feel the sickening give of the silk beneath her feet, but it was surprisingly strong. More like metal than cloth. She held her quarterstaff out like an acrobat walking a tightrope, half for balance and half so she had something to look at besides the palm-sized spiders tending the thinner pieces of the web, or the darkness beneath the silver strands.

Darkness that went on and on and on. She couldn't help but feel like, if she dropped something, it would never land.

Don't look down, she told herself. Something the color of rubies skittered to her right. *Don't look at the spiders either.*

She resisted the urge to squeeze her eyes shut. Now, she thought, would be a great time for some of Jhi's calming influence. But it didn't

come. Apparently Meilin was on her own.

This isn't so bad, she told herself, and then immediately took it back, remembering a lecture Abeke had given her once about inviting bad luck. *This is bad enough*, she corrected, hoping it wasn't too late. *This is definitely bad enough*.

And yet, somehow, it was beautiful, too. Funny, how things could be both. How the most wonderful places were unsettling, and the most terrifying places possessed a kind of grace.

With every step they made, Xanthe, Takoda, Conor, and Meilin produced a strange sort of music. Xanthe stepped lithely from one strand to another, following the network of strongest lines. As she did, bass gave way to a faint sweet sound. Takoda shifted, and his own tone changed. Briggan padded steadily along. Conor trembled slightly, and the music warbled. Meilin had learned music back in Zhong, in between her lessons in the bow and staff. Now she recognized the trail of keys.

A. C. F.

It was lovely, that music, so lovely that Meilin could almost forget that they were standing on a massive spiderweb. Almost.

"In the legends," whispered Xanthe, her words accentuated by the melody, "the spiders tended the Arachane Fields, but they weren't what stopped people from crossing."

A. D. E.

"That was the music," continued Xanthe. "It was said to trap anyone without purpose. To ensnare those with darkness in their hearts."

To Meilin's right, Conor shivered. She wanted to reach out, to lay a hand on his arm, but he was too far away.

"To drag them under ... " continued Xanthe. "And—"

"You know," said Meilin, careful to keep her voice even. "Maybe now's not the best time for stories. Let's just get across the field."

But the field showed no signs of ending. It stretched on, as far as she could see, the silver threads vanishing into shadow.

A crimson spider with legs as thin and sharp as needles stood several yards away, its many eyes passing over them as it stitched at the web. *Nice spider*, thought Meilin, feeling queasy. *Good spider*.

They were almost there. One more obstacle down, one more test passed, one step closer to the nightmarish Wyrms at the roots of the Evertree, a foe Meilin could fight, an enemy she could defeat.

They were almost there.

Another spider, this one emerald, shone in the corner of her sight.

She tried to imagine Rollan there beside her, not because it gave her strength, but because the thought of him having to navigate this place was funny. Rollan, who liked to put on such a face, pretend he was tough. He hated spiders. Hated anything that crept and crawled. He said it was because of his time on the streets, but Meilin knew they just made him squeamish. In her mind, he shuddered, and stuck out his tongue, and hopped from foot to foot in disgust, and the image made Meilin smile.

And then she slipped.

She didn't fall—she caught herself on two silky, silvery ropes, breath held and body taut—but the sudden movement, the force of her slip and the weight of her body landing, was enough to send a tremor through the web.

First one cord.

Then four.

Then eight.

Out and out like ripples in a pond, until the entire web seemed to be shuddering, the movements leading away from—and back to—Meilin.

She went still, as if that would stop the web's tremor, and bit the inside of her cheek against the sound of fear trying to claw its way up. To every side, her friends stilled. Conor, Takoda, and Xanthe froze, Briggan lowering into a crouch, as all around, the jewel-toned spiders stopped their work and turned their myriad eyes, following the movement of the web.

Meilin squeezed her eyes shut and cursed herself, cursed her tired body and her straining mind, cursed her fear, and the fact that after everything, *she* would be the one to get them killed. She could feel the web shifting beneath her, could feel the spiders' approach, and she forced herself not to fight, because fighting would only draw more spiders. If she stayed still, if she let them come to her and her alone, the others might still get away.

The cord beneath her dipped slightly under the weight of the approaching spiders, and Meilin held her breath.

And then she felt it, on her shoulder, not a spider's needly limb, but a human hand.

Conor's hand.

"I've got you," he said, and even though his eyes were feverish, his grip was strong.

"Thanks," she said, her voice shaking as she let him help her to her feet.

And Conor smiled that warm, kind smile of his, a smile that the infection couldn't take from him, not yet. "You've been saving me a lot lately," he said. "I figured it was my turn."

She saw the ghost of pain crossing his face, felt the tremor in his touch, but he didn't let go, and neither did she.



12

THE FESTIVAL

WHEN ABEKE WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, IN A FOREIGN bed in a foreign city, the air was thick with a coming storm.

She could feel the weather weighing on her chest, brewing in her lungs, and she wished the rain would just start falling. Waiting for storms was always worse than getting soaked.

But all morning, it didn't come.

The clouds hung low with the promise of rain, and made the day muggy, but the storm held back.

Abeke packed and repacked her satchel, read and re-read the note from Olvan saying Conor and Meilin and Takoda were still alive. She was as restless as Uraza, who refused to go back into her passive state, despite frightening half the castle residents and stealing two pheasants from the kitchens. The leopard was stretched at the base of the bed, violet eyes closed but tail flicking side to side.

“Fine, then,” said Abeke after an hour of pleading. “You can stay here in this stuffy room while I go off on an adventure.” She was halfway to the door when she felt the sudden flare of heat against her skin and saw the fresh black of the tattoo running down her arm.

Abeke shook her head. Stubborn cat.

She went looking for Rollan and found him sitting on the floor of a library with the white-blond girl, Tasha. Essix was perched in the windowsill—maybe even she could feel the coming storm. There was a stack of cards on the floor between Rollan and Tasha, but whatever the game was, they were no longer playing it. They were talking. When

Abeke caught the edge of their conversation, she hesitated and hung back, hidden from view. It wasn't eavesdropping, she told herself, since they were a team, and she'd have made Rollan tell her everything later anyway.

"... my city," Tasha was saying, "my parents."

"Yeah, but your parents didn't summon Ninani," said Rollan. "*You* have to make this choice. And I meant what I said, about the Great Beasts not belonging to one land."

"But Stetriol needs me."

"So do the Greencloaks."

Tasha murmured something Abeke couldn't hear, a sound of uncertainty.

"You know," said Rollan quietly, "I didn't want to be a Greencloak at first. I agreed to help them, sure, but I wouldn't put on the color, not for ages."

"Why not?" asked Tasha.

Rollan hesitated. "It felt like too much," he said at last. "It was easier, safer, not to care. You see, for a long time I didn't have anyone, and then all of a sudden there were these people who wanted me around. Needed my help. Cared what happened to me. It was scary, and I knew that if I let it matter, let myself care too much, then I could mess it up. As long as I didn't commit to them, I couldn't really fail. Couldn't let anyone down."

"What made you change your mind?"

"The people I met," he said.

"But I thought they were what scared you."

"They did," he said, then added with a chuckle, "They still do." And Abeke knew he was thinking about Meilin in particular. "But," he went on, "I guess I realized that it's worth it. Caring about people enough to fight alongside them. Caring about something enough to fight for it. There was a Greencloak named Tarik. He showed me ..." Rollan's voice faltered. "He showed me it was worth it."

Abeke peered around the corner, saw the sadness in Rollan's usually guarded face.

"Is he back at Greenhaven?" asked Tasha.

Rollan swallowed, shook his head, and Tasha seemed to understand what he was saying, and what he *wasn't*.

"I'm sorry," she said, wrapping her arms around her legs, resting her chin on her knees.

"He was like a father," said Rollan after a moment. "And he fought to protect Erdas. *All* of it."

Tasha's gaze went to the window, to Essix and the storm-laden sky of Stetriol. Abeke pressed her back to the wall and listened.

"It's not easy," said Rollan. "It's scary, and it's dangerous, to stand up for things. But there aren't that many people in this world who can really make a difference, and we can."

"We ... " she said softly.

"You're one of them. One of *us*. But if you stay here, we can't help you. And you can't help us."

There was a long silence. Abeke bit her lip, and heard Rollan get to his feet. "There's never been a Greencloak from Stetriol," he said. "You'd be the very first."

Abeke heard Rollan walking toward the door, toward *her*, when Tasha said, "Okay."

Rollan's steps paused. "Okay?" he echoed lightly.

"I'll come with you," said Tasha, her voice gaining strength. "I'll do whatever I have to, to protect Stetriol. And the rest of Erdas."

"I'm glad to hear it," he said.

Rollan sounded so serious, so mature, but when he rounded the corner and nearly ran into Abeke, he jumped and let out a mousy squeak that made her bite back a laugh. "Gah!"

Abeke clamped a hand over his mouth and tugged him down the hall.

"Do you always have to *creep* everywhere?" he hissed when they were out of earshot.

"It is my way," she said with a shrug and a gentle grin.

"I'm going to put bells on you when you sleep," muttered Rollan, shoving his hands in his pockets. "So I suppose you heard everything I said?"

He sounded a little embarrassed, even though he had no reason to be.

“Enough to know that Tasha’s coming with us,” said Abeke lightly as they stepped through the castle doors and down into the courtyard. “Good job.”

Rollan scuffed his boot and murmured a yeah-whatever-don’t-worry, which was about as close as he got to accepting a compliment. “Ugh.” He made a stifled noise. “It’s so humid I can *feel the air*.” He dragged his hands back and forth.

Abeke looked up. The clouds were darkening overhead, but still no rain. She bit her lip, trying not to take the roiling sky as an omen. Back home in Okaihee, it wasn’t just the bad weather that people worried about. The violent dust storms were dangerous enough, but what scared the villagers was the time before they struck. The longer it took for the storm to break, the worse it would usually be.

Looking up at the churning clouds, she had a bad feeling about this one. Did Stetriol usually get this kind of weather? Or was it another side effect of the sickening Evertree?

Beside her, Rollan was still complaining as he wrangled himself out of his cloak and rolled it under his arm.

“Come on,” he said, catching her look. “Don’t you ever want to take it off and just be Abeke?”

“I *am* Abeke.”

“You know what I mean. Not Greencloak Abeke of Nilo, bond of Uraza!” he said, mimicking Bern’s deep booming voice. “Just Abeke,” he added, returning to his own. Abeke laughed, but the truth was, she understood. She didn’t chafe under the mantle like Rollan did, but she still felt its weight. And besides, the humidity from the coming storm *was* oppressive. She shrugged out of the cloak and folded it over her arm, hiding the mark of Uraza beneath the green fabric.

The two walked beyond the castle gates and into town, looking not like Greencloaks, but ordinary kids.

They didn’t have a destination in mind, not at first, and simply wandered the streets. For all their differences, Abeke and Rollan shared a restless streak, born of their upbringings, one tracking and hunting on the Niloan plains, the other scrounging on the streets of Concorba. They both hated sitting still.

Besides, it was nice to take in Stetriol without the procession of guards or the scrutiny of a crowd. Abeke's first impressions held true. The city was definitely rebuilding. Doors and windows were open, and people stood talking on steps and picnicking in courtyards. In one square, she saw a female Greencloak and a local carrying a piece of slate together. In another, an old Greencloak and an even older Stetriolan were deep into a game of stones; the Greencloak's animal, a raccoon, playing its own game with pebbles under the table.

The serpent—once the symbol of Stetriol—still marked many of the stores and streets, carved into lintels and etched into curbs, and yet its green S-like pattern now reminded Abeke of the curve of Ninani's neck.

"See?" She nudged Rollan's shoulder as they walked. "It's not so bad, is it?"

"It's like a different world," admitted Rollan grudgingly. But he was obviously still skeptical; she could see him fingering the hilt of the dagger on his belt, scanning the city for trouble.

And then, as they walked down a road lined with shops, trouble ran right into him.

Not in the form of an attacker or a thug, but a small girl, no higher than his waist, clutching a disk of bread.

She stumbled, scrambling to catch the dropped disk, while heavy steps rang out on the path. Before Abeke could react, Rollan had the girl tucked behind them, and when the pursuer—a heavysset man in billowing blue robes—appeared, demanding to know if they'd seen a thief, Rollan simply shrugged and said, "Can't help you."

The man turned his sweating face to Abeke. "What about you, girl?"

Abeke shook her head innocently, and the man trudged off, cursing to himself. As soon as he was gone, Rollan swung the terrified girl up into his arms. "There now," he said, his voice gentle, teasing. "The trick is to eat the food *while* you're running off with it. That way, there's no evidence!"

Abeke was always caught off guard by Rollan's streaks of kindness. At first she'd pegged *Conor* as the nurturer, but Rollan had a fondness for those in need, and a way with them, too. Within moments he had the

girl's tears replaced by a toothy smile, and then a laugh, as he sent her on her way with the disk of bread safely in her hands.

"What?" he said, catching Abeke's look as the girl vanished in the maze of streets.

"I forgot how much you like kids."

Rollan shrugged. "Nothing against kids," he said. "Heck, I'm a kid. It's the grown-ups you have to watch out for." His stomach made a loud growling sound, and he fetched a few Stetriolan coins from his pocket and clinked them in his palm. Olvan had given them some coins before they set out, for necessities, but most of their needs were being met by the castle. Abeke was about to make a joke about them finding some stew when she heard a long, high whistle, followed by a bang.

At first she tensed, assuming they were under attack, but an instant later she saw the burst of purple light against the low clouds, and realized it was a firework.

"Do you hear that?" she asked, craning her head in the direction of the explosion.

Rollan's brows went up. "I think *everyone* heard that, Abeke."

"No," she said. "Not the blast. I mean the *cheering*." She didn't wait for him to answer, but started walking, eyes half-lidded, letting her ears sharpen and pick apart the sounds the way she did when tracking prey. Rollan followed, a stride behind, and as they wound through the city, Abeke could hear the sounds of celebration getting nearer. Shouts and cheers, interrupted by the whistles and pops of smaller fireworks.

All of a sudden they rounded a corner and found themselves at the edge of a growing crowd.

It looked like some kind of festival.

"Oh!" said Rollan, his spirits brightening as he took in the line of stalls. After a moment, his attention narrowed like a hawk, everything else forgotten. "I smell meat."

Another firework exploded overhead, shaking the world like thunder—no, there was thunder there as well, rumbling through the clouds—and the people of Stetriol whistled and whooped. Rollan jogged away, but Abeke couldn't tear her attention from the road, where people were pressing, shoulder to shoulder, jostling to see something around the bend.

A procession. When she stretched onto her toes, she could see it rolling down the street toward them.

Men and women in the official blues and blacks of Stetriol waved sticks with bird-shaped kites fluttering on top. It looked like an entire flock. The sticks were a dozen different lengths, the paper birds atop them a dozen shapes and sizes—hawks and eagles, doves and geese—but they'd all been painted white.

Abeke frowned. It didn't make sense. The symbol of Stetriol was a serpent, not a bird.

The air, still thick with impending rain, was now buzzing with excitement, but Abeke's bad feeling was getting worse. "What do you think they're celebrating?" she asked as Rollan reappeared at her elbow with two skewers of what looked like beef.

"Who knows," he said, passing her one of the skewers. "Loosen up. Have a meat stick."

But Abeke waved the food away. Between the brewing storm and the swarming crowd, she was beginning to feel dizzy. The warning plucked at her ribs, and she could almost feel Uraza's coiled energy, her twitching tail, as Abeke's vision sharpened. She scanned the crowd for danger.

Amid the blues and blacks and the fluttering streaks of white, the flash of a red cloak on the other side of the street caught her eye.

"Rollan, look!" she said, tugging on his sleeve. But by the time he turned his attention from his skewer to the crowd, the red had been swallowed up again by the other colors.

"What?" he asked, his mouth full of food.

Abeke shook her head. "I ... I thought I saw—"

She was cut off by a round of fireworks. The sky lit up with bursts of white. The parade had almost reached them, swelling with every block. Men and women and children cheered as the birds swung and danced on the air.

"Excuse me," said Abeke, touching the sleeve of a woman in front of her. "What is all this for? Is it a holiday?"

"Haven't you heard?" said the woman, twisting toward them. Her face was painted with a swan. "Ninani has come to Stetriol!"

It was like a punch to the stomach.

Rollan cursed beneath his breath. “This isn’t good,” he said.

“No,” muttered Abeke. “It’s not.”

The arrival of the Great Beast in Stetriol should have stayed a secret. But Ernol was right. Word had obviously spread like fire. Abeke was just wondering *how* when she saw Ernol himself at the center of the crowd, waving a stick with a large white swan fluttering on top.

“That fool,” growled Rollan. “He has no idea what he’s doing!”

Another firework exploded. Abeke turned and tried to jostle her way through the crowd, swinging the green cloak back over her shoulders. She felt Rollan behind her but didn’t look back. They had to get to the castle. They had to find Tasha and Ninani and get away from Stetriol before word spread beyond its borders. Before it reached Zerif.

And then, just as she broke free of the crowd, it hit her.

A wave of sickness.

Suddenly Abeke swayed, feeling ill.

It wasn’t the same dizziness that had plagued her through the city with the brewing storm, but a bright, sharp sickness. Her nerves cramped and her muscles twisted around her bones. Pain burned through her, but just as she recognized what was happening and the terror of it hit her, the wave was gone. She could breathe again. She could move. She could think. It had lasted only a second. Long enough to knock the air from her lungs, long enough to make her shake, but even as she trembled, she stared down at her hands, confused. The first time the bonds had strained, the sickness had been much worse. It had seemed to last forever.

Rollan stood beside her, looking pale, his hand bleeding where he’d gripped the skewer too hard and it had broken, cutting into his palm. “Did you feel that?” he mumbled hoarsely. “That was ...”

Abeke swallowed. “Yeah, but it felt more like an aftershock than an event.”

“Yeah,” agreed Rollan nervously, “but doesn’t an aftershock usually come *after*?”

“Then maybe it wasn’t an aftershock,” she said, trembling. “Maybe it was a warning.”

Rollan opened his mouth, but before he could speak, something caught his attention.

“Hey,” he snapped over her head.

Abeke straightened, following his gaze, and saw red. The figure in the red cloak stood several yards away, noticing them as soon as they did him. Again and again he’d looked like a shadow, a ghost, but now he was very real, the ends of his cloak flicking and snapping in the stormy wind. His mask was smooth and empty, but behind it, his eyes were pale and sharp.

He inched back a step, and Abeke held up her hands. “Stop,” she said. “We just want to talk.”

For an instant, no one moved.

For an instant, she thought he’d stay.

And then a firework went off, shattering any chance of calm.

In the blast of sound and light, the masked boy spun and ran. Rollan growled and Abeke sighed, and the two of them took off at a sprint through the streets of Stetriol.



13

THE CHASE

THE SKY SHUDDERED WITH THUNDER AND LIGHT.

The people cheered and sang and crowded in the streets, making it harder and harder to keep sight of the figure in red, let alone catch up to him.

Rollan was starting to wish he hadn't eaten that skewer of meat.

Even with the crimson cloak standing out against the sea of cooler colors, the boy was fast—too fast. He wove through stalls and vanished for long seconds, only to reappear on the other side of a street or on a balcony, climbing a wall or running along the wooden spines of stalls.

The streets of Stetriol were less a grid than a tangled mess, but the stranger moved the way Rollan once had through the streets of Concorba during his years as an urchin, like he knew every crack in the ground, every twist and turn, every way to disappear.

How is he so fast? thought Rollan as they reached the edge of the crowd and swung a hairpin turn. The figure's red cloak had been trailing like a tongue around the corner, but by the time they rounded it, he was gone. Rollan cursed and kicked a bin.

"Split up!" called Abeke, and before he could say that he thought that was a bad idea (because of the crowd and the storm and the fact that he still felt woozy from the weakened bond), she was gone, ducking down another side street in a blur of speed and grace.

"Enough of this," grumbled Rollan, swinging the green cloak back around his shoulders.

He had spent enough time being chased to know the way a person fled when they wanted to lose a tail. He took a running jump, pushing off a stack of empty crates, and then the wall, nearly losing his balance before he caught the tiled edge of the roof and hauled himself up. Lightning forked across the darkening sky, and Essix's screech cut through the air as he clambered up the slate tiles and got to his feet, scanning the streets below. The city unfolded around him, a maze of roads, houses, courtyards, open in a way it hadn't been from the ground. *Sometimes*, thought Rollan, *you just need a change of perspective*. Now, on the roof, he tried to see the city the way he would have back when he was a street thief in Concorba, back before he'd joined the Greencloaks. Before he'd become one of them.

Then again, now that he *was* one of them, Rollan had something he'd never had as a street urchin.

Rollan dropped to a crouch and closed his eyes.

He clutched the tiled roof as the world tipped away, his vision going dark, and then swinging back into focus, no longer on the roof, but overhead.

The change in perspective was dizzying, tunneling in and out with the weakening bond. Again Rollan wished he hadn't eaten that food, but he wasn't about to forfeit the contents on someone's roof, so he tried to focus on Stetriol through Essix's falcon eyes as she scanned the city, searching for a swatch of red.

The celebrations painted the city in bright colors below, sound tangling with light and movement, all so sharp and—

A firework detonated too close to Essix's head, and for an instant Rollan's vision went blinding white. He gasped, gripping the rooftop, but the falcon wasn't wounded, only stunned, and he could feel her annoyance as she dipped and wove through the firework's falling debris. Her vision—now his—returned, and as it did, Rollan saw the shape of the red cloak sprinting away down an alley two blocks south.

"Got you," whispered Rollan, opening his eyes. His sight bottomed out, then settled back into his head. He took a single steadying breath before launching off along the roof's edge, tracing the gutters and

climbing the peaks until he caught sight of the red cloak rounding a corner up ahead.

From his vantage point on the roof, Rollan smiled.

The stranger in red must not know the city as well as he thought he did, because he was heading straight into a dead end. The sides of the narrow street were high, and instead of giving way onto another road, the alley turned a corner and ended abruptly in a brick wall, the back of some tavern or inn.

Rollan ran along the rooftops, and then, before the masked figure could realize his mistake, Rollan dropped from the courtyard wall and landed in a crouch before him, blocking the only way out.

“Aha!” he said with a grin. “Caught you.”

The figure turned, the silvery wood of his mask eerily smooth and faceless. Up close, there was nothing specter-like about the stranger. He was tall—taller than Rollan, anyway—and Rollan tried not to think about the way his opponent had taken on Suka the Polar Bear.

“Take off that mask,” said Rollan, taking a step forward and drawing his dagger. “There’s nowhere to go.”

He heard steps, and Abeke rounded the corner, skidding to a stop beside him when she saw the masked figure.

“Who are you?” she called out, breathless.

The boy in red didn’t speak. He held up his hands, eyes narrowed to slits behind his faceless mask. Rollan didn’t know if he was surrendering or telling them both to stay back. Then, in one fluid motion, the figure spun away and leaped, pushing with startling strength off the corner of the wall and vaulting one, two, three steps straight up the wall before landing on top of the roof. He didn’t flee. From his new perch the stranger turned to face them again, almost taunting.

“No, you don’t!” Rollan tried to follow, took a running start at the wall and jumped. He got one boot up, and almost got two, but before he could manage the second he lost his footing and fell back to the street, landing roughly on his backside. He could have really used Arax’s old talisman right about now.

“Okay,” he grumbled, getting to his feet. “You can stay up there ... ” Over the stranger’s shoulder, he saw Essix diving, talons forward, and

smirked. "... For all I care ... "

Essix screeched and sank her nails into the stranger's back. Or at least, she meant to. At the last second the stranger spun, cloak billowing as he dodged Essix's talons and somehow kept his balance on the roof's edge. The falcon tried to bank, but the stranger's hand shot out and caught Essix by the throat.

Rollan let out a panicked sound. Essix tried to claw her way free, but her talons raked uselessly against the stranger's forearm, as if he were wearing armor. The stranger's grip tightened.

"Stop!" cried Rollan, but the figure in red didn't hurt the bird.

"Call her back," he ordered, his voice low and gruff, slightly muffled by the mask.

Rollan didn't hesitate, and neither did the falcon. He called Essix back to him, and Essix came; in a flash of light she vanished from the stranger's hand and reappeared on Rollan's skin. The masked figure turned his head sharply, as if hearing something in the distance. Something besides fireworks and thunder and song.

"Who are you?" demanded Abeke again. The figure's masked face tipped down as he considered her. Another fork of lightning split the sky behind him, and his cloak fluttered ominously in the wind. "Why are you following us?" she added.

When at last the stranger answered, all he said was, "You should go."

"Oh, yeah?" Rollan snapped. "Why don't you come down here and make—"

"Why were you in the forest that day?" cut in Abeke. "And why are you here in Stetriol? Are you trying to collect the Great Beasts for yourself?"

The faceless mask tipped to the side. "No," he said sternly. "We seek to protect the future from the past."

Oh, great, thought Rollan. Now the stranger was talking in the royal *we*.

Again, something caught the masked boy's attention. Something Rollan couldn't see. "It's not safe here," he said. "You need to ... "

But his words trailed off, swallowed not by a rumble of thunder but by the rushing of blood in Rollan's ears. An instant later, the crushing

pain hit him, this time not in a warning, but in a *wall*. He could feel the bones in his body shudder in time with the Evertree as it trembled halfway across the world. Pain—crushing, tearing, lasting pain—tore through his body, and the next thing he knew he was on his hands and knees, trying not to black out.

He heard Abeke scream beside him, heard her small body collapse to the cobbled street. But Rollan couldn't help her, couldn't even call her name. He tried, but his jaw was clenched, teeth locked together in agony as he curled in on himself, something deep inside him twisting so hard he was sure it would break. Rollan's vision swam, and he pressed his palms against his eyelids, trying desperately to make the stuttering vision stop.

And then, at last, he felt it.

A drop of cold rain broke the fevered spell of the tearing bond, dragging him back to his senses. Cold rain kissed his temple, his cheek. Cold rain slicked the ground beneath him and tapped a beat against his arms. Rollan wanted to stay there, curled on the alley floor, and let the rain wash over him until the last of the burning pain was gone. He wanted to, but he couldn't. It felt like hours lost, when it was only minutes, and he had to get up.

Something was wrong. Hadn't something been wrong?

A boy in red. A girl in white. A swan.

Ninani.

Stetriol.

The parade.

This is how his mind came back to him, in drops of rain.

Thunder rolled through, but it sounded too low, too close.

He heard Abeke's shuddering breath beside him, saw her roll onto her stomach, then rise to her knees.

Everything ached, and his heart was pounding in his head, but he could move again, and he forced himself up to his hands and knees.

"You *need to get up*," said a voice gruffly.

Rollan looked up. He'd expected the masked boy to be long gone, or at least atop the wall, but he was standing in the alley, masked face bowed over Rollan, boot prodding his shin. "Get. Up."

“Who do you think you are?” snapped Rollan, staggering to his feet, his body still ringing with pain.

“You need to go *now*,” said the figure in the red cloak. “They’re coming. They were waiting for you to stumble. Now they’re here.”

“What are you talking ab—” started Abeke, but she was cut off by an explosion.

Another firework, only this one wasn’t overhead.

The boom seemed to come from the top of a building nearby, and Rollan’s stomach turned as it was followed an instant later by a scream of terror, the rain of slate tiles crashing to the ground.

Why had someone shot off a firework so low?

In his dazed state, it took Rollan a moment to understand.

Stetriol wasn’t celebrating anymore.

The city was under attack.



UP IN FLAMES

CONOR WASN'T AFRAID OF SPIDERS, AND EVEN IF HE WAS, they were the least of his problems right now.

The group was halfway across the Arachane Fields when his hands started to shake again, and his vision tunneled, and the whispers began to weave through the music in his head. He was getting too tired too fast. He might actually have told Meilin that he needed to stop, needed a break to collect his energy, his thoughts, if they weren't standing rather precariously in the middle of a sprawling spiderweb.

A strand away, Meilin made her way cautiously forward, along with Xanthe and Takoda.

Conor took a step and nearly missed the silver thread entirely when his vision doubled at the last instant. His breath caught as he fought for balance. The web trembled beneath him, and the nearest spider, its body amber and its limbs black, pivoted to look at him with its many, many, many eyes. Conor felt in that moment as if it could see the darkness roiling inside him.

The Arachane Fields ... guard the way against evil.

And the spiders?

... catch anything the music doesn't.

Conor swallowed. The spider chattered, and he could *feel* the parasite moving beneath his skin. But the more he thought about it, the more the spiders in the web seemed to think about *him*, so he wrestled with his panic and fear, tried to find calm the way he had so long ago, when he was only a shepherd tending a flock in Trunswick. How many hours had

he spent there, gazing up at the sky, finding peace in the slow procession of clouds, the steady blue, or even the soothing sound of rain?

He tipped his head back now, the way he had then, only to be reminded that there was no sky here, clear or stormy. There was only the ceiling of the cave, so high above it vanished into black.

“Conor?” came Meilin’s voice, over the whispers and the field’s strange melody. That voice was the closest thing he had to a sky—not a stretch of blue, but the steady slate gray of a winter afternoon—and he held fast to it. And when Briggan rested his muzzle against his back, Conor grounded himself in that, too. In the simple weight of a friend’s voice and a familiar’s steadfast calm.

He took a deep breath and continued forward, steady, steady.

And then, just as he was stepping from one strand to another, he felt it. Like a blow to the chest, all the air knocked out of him in a sudden burst of pain. At first he thought it was the parasite, clawing through his nerves, but then he saw Takoda gasp and bow his head, saw Meilin stop and clutch her chest, and realized that whatever it was, they could feel it, too, which meant it could be only one thing.

The bond.

Briggan cowered beside him with a whine, and Conor forced his body down into a crouch to keep from toppling over into the dark, bracing himself for the spine-curling agony that had hit him once before.

But it didn’t come.

In fact, almost as quickly as the pain shuddered through him, it was gone. A passing shadow, a glancing blow.

“What was that?” asked Xanthe, pink eyes wide with confusion. “What happened to you guys?”

“The bonds,” hissed Takoda through gritted teeth. “Our spirit animals ... the tree ... ”

“That wasn’t ... so bad,” gasped Conor, still on his hands and knees.

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Meilin, rubbing her chest. “The Evertree is getting worse, not better. The effects of the strain should be getting worse, too.”

“Maybe,” said Conor, trying to suppress the waver in his voice. “But you won’t find me complaining. If I never feel that again, it’ll be too

soon.”

He straightened and realized with surprise and dread that the web beneath them was no longer flat, but bowing heavily under a new weight.

Conor looked up and tensed with horror as he saw Kovo standing among them.

Takoda had either summoned the Great Beast, or the ape had been released with the shuddering of the bond. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that the massive ape was now standing in the field of silver thread, and even though the web didn't snap, it warped and bent around Kovo's weight. Realization rippled through the group, but they weren't the only ones.

The spiders around the web had noticed, too.

They clicked and hissed, and began to skitter across the web toward the bowing center.

“Takoda,” snapped Meilin, fighting for balance as the ground tilted beneath her. “Put him away!”

“I ... I can't.”

“*Try!*” said Conor.

“Come on, Kovo,” said Takoda, voice pleading. The ape only bared his teeth and growled. Briggan snarled back, an alpha trying to subdue a member of his pack, but Kovo was no wolf. He beat his chest and made a sound that shook the strings and sent the melody scattering.

“He's going to break the web!” shouted Meilin as the spiders skittered closer.

“Kovo,” insisted Takoda, trying to keep his voice low and even as he pulled open the collar of his robe and exposed his throat, where the mark of the Great Beast had been. “Please.”

The ape turned his red eyes on the boy, and for a second Conor thought he might actually, grudgingly, obey.

But then something moved behind one of the curtains of silver thread. They all spun as a creature parted the curtains and stepped through. Briggan bristled, and Kovo clenched his fists, and Conor gaped as out came the largest spider he had *ever* seen. Larger than a spider had any right to be. Its body was as big as Kovo's, its legs as thick as the cords of silver silk they balanced on. A hundred eyes—some emerald and others

sapphire and others amber—stared out from its head. Venom dripped from two fanglike pincers that hung below its jaw.

Meilin actually swayed on her feet, the last of the color draining from her face at the sight of the giant arachnid.

The Webmother, thought Conor.

Kovo had disturbed the *Webmother*.

And unlike the smaller spiders that, until Kovo's reappearance, had left them alone, the Webmother hissed and clicked and immediately started toward them.

"Uh-oh," said Xanthe.

Conor craned his head and could just make out the far edge of the field, the place ahead where silver thread gave way to stone again. They needed to run, but there was no way. The Webmother clambered toward them from one direction, and the dozens of smaller spiders were spilling in from every other side, surrounding the group with eyes and legs and chittering. On instinct, Conor tried to retreat, and nearly lost his balance on the thread.

"Xanthe," he said, voice tight. "Anything in the legends about what to do now?"

"No ... "

"Great," growled Meilin, gripping her staff. "I guess we fight."

"Wait." The pale-skinned girl actually took a step *toward* the Webmother, hands raised as if in supplication. "Maybe we can talk—"

"Do you speak spider?" asked Takoda anxiously.

"No, but if she understands that we just want to—"

The giant spider hissed her disapproval, jaws opening.

"Bad plan," said Meilin, grabbing Xanthe's shoulder and pulling her backward, narrowly avoiding the bead of venom that dripped from the Webmother's fangs. It fell to the silver cords and sizzled.

While Xanthe and Meilin had been struggling before the Webmother, Kovo had been signing something to Takoda, and after a second Conor realized what the gesture meant.

Fire.

Fire, fire, fire, signed the ape with urgency, tugging on Takoda's bag until the boy took out the unlit torch and the flint.

Xanthe spun at the sound of flint striking.

“No, *wait*,” she pleaded, but it was too late. A spark caught the torch’s head and lit, burning with reddish-gold light against the field’s blue-silver. Takoda held the flame high, and the surrounding spiders scrambled backward in the face of the torch’s heat and glow, their many eyes alight. The Webmother reared up at the sight of the fire, screeching in anger and shaking the web beneath them.

Meilin tore a piece of fabric from her shirt and wrapped it around her quarterstaff, touching Takoda’s torchlight to the cloth until it caught, too. Takoda faced the Webmother while Meilin swung the quarterstaff back and forth to ward off the smaller spiders, her knuckles white around the wood.

They were surrounded. But the fire seemed to be keeping the spiders at bay.

“Now what?” asked Xanthe.

“We move as a group,” said Meilin. “All together, toward the edge of the field.” And for a few steps, as they shuffled forward, with spiders circling, backs together across the strongest threads, Conor thought it might actually work. They were their own beast, a many-limbed, fire-eyed creature, moving carefully, if not gracefully, across the silver web.

And then the Arachane Fields trembled.

A shudder went through the entire cavern, not just the cords of spider silk beneath his feet, but through the vaulting cave above, as the unseen roots of the Evertree tensed and twisted and writhed.

Oh no, thought Conor, just before the pain hit him like a wall.

If the first shudder had been a glancing blow, this was a beating.

The world around him fell away, the Arachane Fields and the silvery light and the spiders vanishing with the rest of Conor’s sight as the pain ripped through him. His body tore itself away from his will, collapsing to the web like a puppet with the strings cut. He curled in on himself as every muscle in his body spasmed and every bone ached. Somewhere, Takoda cried out and Kovo roared with fury and beat his chest, Briggan howled, a wild, wolfish cry, and Meilin screamed and fell to her knees. Conor fought the sickness, fought the pain, fought his body the way he’d been fighting it for weeks, and struggled to his hands and knees.

Through the tears streaming down his face, he saw the spiders on the web frozen like drops of dew, their many-eyed faces turned up toward the suffering roots.

He saw Meilin driving the end of the quarterstaff into the silver cord beneath her, trying to force herself up.

He saw Takoda sway on his feet, and Xanthe, the only one of them immune, catch the boy before he fell.

Catch the boy, but not the torch.

Saw it go tumbling to the field of thread.

Saw the web catch instantly, the silver thread lighting like oil.

Conor gasped, clawing his way back to his senses as the fire licked outward, and the Webmother and her kin recoiled, and Briggan—his Briggan—eyes wide in animal horror, took off at a run across the igniting fields.

“Briggan!” shouted Conor, scrambling, stumbling, forcing himself back up as the wolf sprinted away across the silver web, looking less like a Great Beast and more like a spooked dog. All around them, the threads began to melt and snap. The music they’d made, once sweet, now warbled and fell apart like a melody dropped, the chords tripping out of tune and then tumbling away entirely, replaced by the shriek of the spiders and the crackle of flames.

“Conor!” called Meilin, now up on her feet. She stumbled backward as a cord in front of her caught fire, and through the billowing white smoke, he saw her point to the end of the field up ahead. But all Conor could think about was finding Briggan.

He spun, disoriented by the echoes of pain and the rising chaos, the light and heat and smoke, and then with terror he saw the wolf trapped by a fiery curtain, the world around him going up in flames, the web warping around the wolf’s paws. Briggan turned in a slow, nervous circle, hackles up, cornered by fire. There was no way back. No way Briggan would ever reach Conor, let alone the edge.

But when he reached out, tried to invite the wolf back into his passive state, Briggan did not come.

A tendril of fire scorched the wolf’s tail and he yelped, tried to pad forward, then back, trapped on the unsteady ropes.

“Briggan!” called Conor, pulling on their bond. But it was too weak, and Briggan’s blue eyes stayed wild. He was too much wolf right now, too little spirit animal ... but Conor knew it was more than that. Knew that, deep down, he didn’t *want* to let the wolf come back, didn’t want to tether Briggan to his failing body, because he was scared of the parasite infecting him, too.

More web fell away. Briggan’s paw slipped as the silk cords beneath him melted.

Briggan was trapped, and Conor was terrified, and the world was falling apart around them, but he knew that, whatever monsters he had to face, he couldn’t face them without his wolf.

He threw out his hand and pulled on the bond with all his strength.

“*BRIGGAN!*” he called the Great Beast back.

And, at last, the Great Beast came.

Briggan vanished from the web just before it crumbled underneath him, and in a flash of light and heat he reappeared on Conor’s skin, a wolf leaping up the arm opposite his wound.

The wolf’s return hit him in a wave of energy and relief. Briggan’s wild strength surged through Conor, and he spun and sprinted with a wolf’s power and balance toward the edge of the field, the place where the silver net stopped and the ground—solid rock—began again. His vision blurred with smoke and tears, but all he could think of was reaching the ledge.

One loping stride, then two, and he was there across the threshold, coughing and stumbling gratefully off the crumbling web and onto solid stone.

Safe.

And then, just as suddenly, not safe.

Because what he didn’t see, not until it was too late, was that the stone ground ended almost as abruptly as it began. The rock was not an expanse but a line, a ridge that gave way suddenly, violently, to nothing. A sheer drop. There was no more ground ahead. No more anything. Conor staggered to a stop on the precipice, so close his toes were curling over the edge, loose pebbles crumbling away and falling down into the dark.

He was the first to reach the rock, and he turned to warn the others, to stop them from barreling forward out of fire and into a fall.

“Wait!” he called as Meilin surged forward onto the ledge, her head down.

Too late.

She looked up at the last minute, her face smudged with ash. She didn't see the chasm, but she saw Conor's panic and tried to pull back in time. But she had too much momentum and too little space. The two of them collided on the precipice.

Conor lost his balance, felt the world give way beneath his feet. For an instant, they both hung there, and then they came apart. Meilin dug in her heels, wrenched herself away. She landed on the stone platform, and Conor was falling back, back, into nothing.

A hand caught his wrist.

It wasn't Meilin's.

It was Xanthe's.

“I've got you,” she said, breathless. They both looked at the place where her pale fingers gripped his sleeve. Meilin was on her feet again. She grabbed his other hand and the two hauled Conor upright on the ledge.

Xanthe let go, turning back to the blazing field.

“Be carefu—” she called, but she never had the chance to finish. Takoda and Kovo were barreling forward, the world on fire at their back. Xanthe dove out of the way as the boy and the ape crashed onto the stone ledge, colliding with a force that slammed into Meilin, who slammed into Conor, and suddenly they all went tumbling over the side and into the dark.



ONE SECOND THEY WERE STANDING ON THE LEDGE, A field on fire at their backs, and the next, they were falling. Meilin didn't know what happened, only that she was holding on to Conor, and then something hit her from behind, and the ground she'd worked so hard to reach was suddenly gone.

And she was plunging down through empty air.

Back in Zhong, she'd always enjoyed the rush of sparring with her tutors, the thrill of a challenge, the way her heart leaped into her throat. She did *not* enjoy the rush of falling. Her heart was still there, in her throat, along with her stomach, and a scream.

Of all the ways to die, this was not the one she had in mind.

But then, too soon, her side hit mud, and suddenly she wasn't falling so much as sliding down a very steep slope covered in mossy earth and slimy stones.

She reached blindly for something, anything, to catch hold of, but couldn't get purchase. Her body had momentum, and she couldn't figure out which way was up long enough to do anything but fall. And then, as suddenly as the world below her had gone from air to mud, it was very briefly air again, and then water.

Meilin broke the surface with a crash, and spluttered and tried to swim before she realized that the water wasn't deep. She was sitting on the silty floor of a pool, or a pond, or a shore. Whatever it was, the water sloshed around her knees as two other bodies thudded into the shallow

expanse beside her, followed by a thunderous crash that could only be Kovo.

“Blech,” said Conor, spitting out a mouthful of grimy water. And he was right. The liquid tasted even worse than it smelled, and it smelled pretty awful.

What had Xanthe called this place, the obstacle beyond the Arachane Fields?

The Sulfur Sea.

She thought she understood why. The air was damp and rotting, and there was a gritty quality to the water, though that might have been the silt they kicked up with their fall. Still, it looked black and brackish as it slid between her fingers. Meilin squinted, straining to see the space around her. There was no light, except for the distant burning of the fields far overhead. It cast strange shadows over everything, turned the world to black and white. At their back was the cliff they’d just descended. Ahead, nothing but a stretch of oily water, trailing into darkness. Meilin thought, not for the first time, about how much she preferred the world *above* ground.

“Is everyone all right?” asked Conor hoarsely.

Takoda mumbled something affirmative, and Meilin got to her feet, brackish water soaking through her shoes and sluicing off her cloak. She’d lost her quarterstaff in the fall, heard it break halfway down. She plunged her hands back into the gritty water to search for the pieces, but her fingers found only mud, rocks. Her hand slid over something smooth, and then moved against something that moved back.

Meilin recoiled.

She couldn’t see through the water. Its surface was a dark slick reflecting only the pale planes of her face and, above, the burning field. Maybe it was best, she thought, even as she forced herself to ask.

“Xanthe,” she said, teeth chattering from the damp soaking through her clothes. “What do you know about the Sulfur Sea?”

But Xanthe didn’t answer.

“Xanthe?” Meilin said again as something brushed her shoe. “Whatever the legends are, we need to know.”

But still the girl didn't speak. Meilin straightened and squinted. In the flickering haze, she could make out the broad shape of Kovo, the narrow one of Takoda, the hunched form of Conor.

No Xanthe.

"Xanthe?" called Conor.

Nothing.

"Xanthe?" called Takoda, voice rising.

Meilin spun in a circle.

There were no pale-skinned bodies floating in the shallows, no girl-shaped shadows standing on the ledge above. Meilin sloshed forward along the shore, heart pounding in her chest. Xanthe knew the way. She was the only one who did.

"Xanthe!" Meilin called out, but she was answered only by her own voice, echoing over the water.

The girl was gone.



ATTACK ON STETRIOL

ABEKE WAS BARELY ON HER FEET WHEN THE BLAST RANG out, far too low for fireworks.

The ground shook with the force of the explosion. The air, once filled with cheers and music, was suddenly overtaken with smoke and screams.

“Get to the castle,” ordered the masked figure. “Find the girl. Get her out.”

And before Abeke could say anything else, he turned and leaped off the wall, vanishing behind it.

Rollan unleashed Essix, and the falcon went soaring angrily up into the sky.

Abeke’s body was still singing with pain, her muscles aching and her thoughts dull, but she managed to mount the wall after the masked boy. His red cloak was already gone, but when she turned to survey what was unfolding across Stetriol, the air caught in her chest. Someone must have set blaze to a toppled supply of fireworks, because another went off, and then another, explosions streaking through the city and colliding with walls, buildings, homes, bursting into flame and light and filling the city with smoke.

Drops of rain hit the ground around her, along with debris—loosened shingles, singed pieces of canvas—but the skies had yet to truly open, and the city was beginning to break and burn.

Figures were swarming through the streets, some human, some animal, their foreheads marked by the horrible black spiral of the infected. Zerif’s creatures. They moved in a kind of hive mind, like a

murmuration of starlings or a colony of ants, overtaking everyone and everything they reached. At every street some peeled away, fanning out to maximize the damage, but the core was heading straight for the castle.

She strained to find the Greencloaks and saw with horror that half of them were still on their hands and knees, crippled by the latest bond strain. Rollan had been looking past her up at the sky, swaying on his feet as his vision emptied and Essix's dark shape swept overhead. An instant later he was back, looking ill. And she could tell he'd seen the same things.

"This way," he said, his voice tight as Abeke jumped down, landing in a crouch beside him.

They backtracked out of the alley and reached the nearest intersection just as two infected pinned a man down in the street.

Rollan caught Abeke's arm before she could race forward, pulled her back into the shadow of the wall as one of the infected raised a dagger to the man's neck. Instead of striking, a dark shape emerged from his cuff and slid the length of the metal, latching on to the man's throat. He writhed and spasmed as the parasite crawled beneath his skin, over his jaw, up his cheek. And then, too soon, his fighting stopped. His body went slack and his captors let go, and the next moment he was on his feet again, the spiral pulsing on his brow.

He lunged for the nearest woman—a Greencloak—and Abeke reached for her bow, only to remember it was back at the castle. And then Rollan's knife went whistling through the air and caught the infected man in the hand, buying the Greencloak an extra moment, a chance to get away. Rollan grabbed Abeke's arm as the other two infected turned toward them.

"Come on," he said, pulling her in the direction of the castle. "We can't save everyone, but we have to save Tasha while there's still time."

The streets were full of shouts, but none of them belonged to the infected. That's what unnerved Abeke most, their silence. Their mouths hung slightly open, air rasping between their teeth. But they said nothing, only came with blade and hand and parasite, corrupting all they touched, and killing what they couldn't. And their animals—their *animals*—attacked, their eyes neither keen nor wild, but empty.

Vessels for something else's will.

A dog bit into a woman's leg, a parasite wriggling between its teeth. A marked lizard snaked across the stone. Overhead, a hawk with a black spiral swooped for Essix, but the gyrfalcon was fast and cunning and got away. Nearby, an owl wasn't as lucky.

Please, thought Abeke as they raced toward the castle, *please never force me to see Conor like this*.

They raced down the streets—streets they'd so recently wandered through laughing, now a scene of terror.

Abeke and Rollan got to the castle gates hoping to find allies, but they found only more chaos. An hour before, the courtyard had been a hub of life, locals and Greencloaks working together. Now some fought together, and others grappled, and others still struggled against their own infected friends. The courtyard was a mess of bodies, several of them down, the rest fighting. Spirit animals swooped and charged, the infected waging war against the bonded, who desperately tried to ward them off.

The infected wore an array of colors, but the clothes meant nothing to them now. The fabric hung from their bodies, the collars torn, the cuffs ragged. All thought of who they were—who they'd been—was now lost to the sickness. Some looked like they might have once been criminals while others wore the marks of nobles—but now they were stripped of everything but blind service, enslaved by Zerif. By the Wurm.

A handful of Greencloaks were trying to hold the front steps, Bern among them.

"We have to find Tasha!" called Rollan, blocking an infected's sword. He kicked the man in the chest and sent him sprawling backward. The infected were strong, but not agile, and it took the man several seconds to stumble to his feet, where a female Greencloak drove a dagger through his back.

"Still inside!" called Bern as he cut down another attacker, his lemur nowhere to be seen. "Find her and go."

Abeke found a cart of weapons inside the courtyard. She took up a quiver and bow just as a woman threw herself ferally at Rollan. Abeke knocked the arrow and loosed it without hesitation; it plunged into the

infected's shoulder. But the woman only hissed and dragged the barb free, seemingly oblivious to the blood running down her front.

"Aim for the heart or the head," ordered one of the Greencloaks. "Nothing else will stop them!"

An osprey shrieked and dove for Abeke's face, talons outstretched, only to be taken down by another Greencloak's arrow. But as she turned to thank the archer, the man fell to an infected with a jagged knife.

Rollan surged up ahead, vanishing into the castle, but just as Abeke reached the entrance, a wild dog sprang through. It lunged for Abeke, its pale fur marred by the black spiral above its eyes as it took her down, pinning her against the landing. She dug her hands into its scruff and fought back its snapping jaws, and then in a flash of light Uraza was there. The leopard pounced, tearing off the dog; it went rolling down the steps. Abeke got to her feet and said a breathless thanks before she and Uraza plunged into the castle.

More Greencloaks fighting. More falling. A blond woman, one of the Greencloaks from the *Tellun's Pride II*, was now on her knees, clawing at her throat as a dark shape crawled beneath her skin. Abeke saw the horrible moment when the fighting stopped and the struggle went out of her eyes.

"In here!" called Rollan from up ahead.

They found Tasha in one of the great halls, cornered by enemies. Two women, a man, and a jaguar. The man was a Greencloak, and one of the women a Stetriolan noble, and none of that mattered because all of them bore the mark of the infected on their skin. Tasha's back was up against the wall, a broken chair leg clutched in her hands, and Ninani before her with wings raised into a large white shield.

More steps were coming down the hall. Not the even tread of allies, but the lumbering tread of those already lost. Rollan spun and barred the door, shoving a shelf in front of it.

And even though Abeke knew they couldn't go back out that way, knew the odds would only get worse with the doors open, she still felt trapped. Which, of course, they were.

"Hey!" Rollan called to the attackers cornering Tasha. "Let's even things out!"

Two of the infected turned at the sound of Rollan's voice, but the third was undeterred, still advancing on Tasha and Ninani. She was reaching toward the swan, a black worm in her palm.

It all happened so fast.

Ninani hissed and reared, and Abeke drew her bow and launched an arrow, piercing the woman's hand and knocking the parasite to the floor. Tasha surged past the swan and swung the chair leg as hard as she could, missing the first time, but landing a blow the second time that dropped the woman to the ground, dazed.

"Ha!" said Tasha triumphantly, just before the woman grabbed her foot and sent her sprawling to the floor, chair leg rolling out of her grip.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," said Tasha as she tried to scramble away, kicking as the woman crawled toward her, grasping.

Abeke nocked another arrow and loosed it.

Aim for the heart or the head.

The barb found its mark, and the woman fell lifeless to the floor in front of the girl.

Tasha's face flooded with relief, but the fight was far from over.

The jaguar turned its hollow gaze on Uraza, who yowled and leaped forward, the two big cats colliding and going down in a tangle of claws and teeth.

Rollan took on one of the attackers, a woman with stringy black hair, and Abeke faced the other, a lanky teen lifting a knife. They both had loose parasites climbing over their clothes, searching for their next host.

"Don't let them touch you," Abeke told Rollan.

"Don't worry," said Rollan, turning a knife in his hand. "I'm not letting them get close."

He slashed with the knife, but the woman dodged, the movement eerily fast and fluid. Her fingers tangled in his collar and he struggled before clocking her upside the head with the butt of the blade.

"*Aaahh*," said Rollan, shaking the parasite from his cloak and crushing it underfoot as the lanky man slashed at Abeke. He was too close for her to shoot, and when she brought the bow up to deflect, his knife came down hard, cracking the wood. She swept his legs out from under him, then cracked her boot across his face.

Abeke spun, searching for Uraza. The first thing she saw was the jaguar's body slumped on the ground. And then it shifted, rolled aside, and the leopard dragged herself slowly to her feet. A gash ran along Uraza's shoulder, and when Abeke saw her spirit animal's lumbering step, her heart stopped with fear. But then the leopard dragged her gaze up, and her eyes were clear and violet, with no sign of infection, no parasite. Abeke threw her arms around the leopard, pressing her forehead to the Great Beast's muzzle.

"Not to break up a moment," cut in Rollan as he crossed to the window, "but we need to go. Tasha. Ninani."

The girl was on her feet again. In a flash of light, the swan vanished, reappearing as a pattern of wings and the curve of a neck down Tasha's arm.

On the other side of the room, the doors shook.

Someone was trying to get in. Abeke hesitated, glancing back.

"Come on," he said. "Help me get this window open."

"What if it's Bern?" she asked.

Rollan swallowed. "I don't think it's Bern."

"We should make sure," she pressed.

He looked to the doors. "Bern?" he called out. "Is that you?" There was no answer, only a growl, and the shudder of the doors against the chest. Rollan looked back at Abeke. "Not Bern. Come on."

He put his weight behind the massive latch—the wood swollen from the storm—and Abeke and Tasha joined him. Together they got the metal to turn, and the window swung open.

The great hall looked out onto the garden a story below, where the fighting had already spilled into the mazelike greenery. More Greencloaks fought amid the hedges and flower-covered cages, but for every one that won, two seemed to fall, and half of those rose again with vicious black marks across their foreheads. The infection was spreading. There were too many to fight.

There was nothing waiting for them down in the garden except more danger, but the garden was circled by a wall. Its top provided a ledge of ivy-covered stone. On the other side the wall gave way not to the castle,

but to the city—and beyond that somewhere, the docks and the ship and the way home.

Only yesterday, Abeke had stared up at the masked stranger in red as he stood on that wall. Now she was climbing through a castle window and lowering herself onto it.

Rollan and Tasha followed. Uraza hesitated, and Abeke held out her arm, inviting the leopard back into her passive state, but Uraza refused and climbed out. Abeke didn't know if the gesture was a sign of protection or a mark of the weakening bond. The leopard padded along the wall with her usual grace, and Abeke was grateful for the gift of her feline balance, while the rest struggled not to fall. The rain was still only a drizzle, but it was enough to slick the tops of the stones on the courtyard wall. Tasha hadn't inherited Ninani's grace and nearly lost her balance twice, Rollan's hand flashing out to steady her before she tumbled over the side.

And then, halfway around the wall, a Greencloak below with a pulsing brand on his forehead saw them and hissed. He began to climb one of the trellises that ran from the garden floor. He moved with the steady fearlessness of the possessed, scaling the lattice and coming toward Abeke, when Essix dove.

The gyrfalcon raked her talons over the man's face. He went over the edge and didn't get back up.

"Good, Essix!" called Rollan shakily as they rounded the edge of the wall. "I love that bird."

One by one, they leaped to the stone street below.

Abeke and Uraza both landed in a crouch. Rollan dropped less gracefully over the edge, but still ended up on his feet. He turned to help Tasha down, but to their surprise, the girl landed and rolled. There was something almost—*almost*—graceful about it.

"Full of surprises," said Rollan, helping her to her feet.

Castle bells rang out overhead. When Abeke glanced back, craning to see, she thought she caught sight of a Greencloak in one of the higher towers—maybe Bern—summoning the infected, drawing their attention back into the castle and away from the young Greencloaks fleeing its walls.

There was a main road that ran from the castle to the docks, but that one was brimming with smoke and fire and fighting bodies. There were too many falling. Too many spiral marks.

“Rollan,” said Abeke, “can you lead us?”

Rollan flashed an exhausted smirk and tipped his head back for an instant, eyes closed. His lips started to move, and Abeke leaned closer to hear what he was saying—*second left, third right, first right, third left*—as he tried to memorize the city. When his eyes flashed open again, he nodded, and they set out.

With Rollan’s help—and Essix’s bird’s-eye view—they made it through the city without being seen, let alone overtaken. All around them, swords clashed and arrows flew on the streets. Beastly snarls and shrieks were woven in with the more human shouts. Uraza prowled at Abeke’s side, ears twitching with the sounds of the falling Stetriol.

And then, somewhere between the main square and the docks, the storm *truly* broke.

Rain pounded the city, weighing down their cloaks and slowing their steps. The leopard growled in displeasure, but Abeke didn’t care about getting wet. They were almost to the docks, and the ship, and safety. Rollan said something, but the downpour swallowed his voice. Abeke could hardly hear over the storm, so she didn’t notice the steps closing in until it was too late.

The back alleys vanished behind them, the roads converged, and the last stretch of space before the docks was laid bare. The docks themselves were eerily empty. A dozen boats ran ashore—a mismatched array of skiffs and galleys and ships, devoid of crews, their ranks now on land, and tearing apart the city.

Abeke, Rollan, and Tasha raced as fast as they could. They were nearly to the mouth of the docks, the *Tellun’s Pride II* in sight, when the infected finally fell upon them. They spilled like wasps out of the cracks to every side, a voiceless army of empty eyes and marked skin, puppets on someone else’s strings.

Abeke was out of arrows, Rollan out of knives. Tasha’s fists were clenched and shaking from shock.

The infected were a wall, a cage, closing in.

It wasn't fair. The ship was so close. It was right there, beyond a barricade of men and women and beasts.

And then, between a flash of lightning and the echo of thunder, she saw it.

A glimpse of red.

He came back, thought Abeke as the figure in the faceless mask vaulted into the fray.

And this time he wasn't alone.

A sea of crimson followed in his wake. A dozen masked figures, all in red, the others with the faces of dogs and cats, rams and boars and deer. They came with staffs and swords and daggers, and a few even seemed to have *claws*. They moved with inhuman speed and animal strength, slamming into the wall of enemies, forcing them back and carving a path to the ship.

“Go!” said the boy in the faceless mask.

And they did, lunging through the gap in the infected horde before it could close again. Essix soared ahead, landing on the ship's rail as the others raced down the dock.

“Worthy! Stead! Shadow!” called the stranger. Three of the red cloaks barred the path to the docks, holding the enemies at bay with blade and arrow.

Who were they? How were they so strong? The questions tangled in Abeke's head as they raced to the *Tellun's Pride II* and freed the ropes from their anchors on the dock. The tethers fell away and the kids clambered up the plank onto the deck. Together, Rollan and Abeke forced the wet canvas of the sails open, and the ship shuddered slightly as the fabric filled with storm wind.

But even as the sails filled, the ship didn't move.

It was caught on something, wedged by some unseen debris.

No, thought Abeke. *No, no, no, we're so close.*

As if he could read her mind, the figure in the faceless mask peeled away from the fight, leaping over the infected and the barricade of his own, and sprinting down the dock toward the ship.

He took up an oar, braced it against the hull, and pushed with all his strength.

“Please,” called Abeke as the ship groaned and began to move. “Tell me who you are.”

The stranger looked up and met her eyes.

“We are the Redcloaks,” he said.

The ship slid free, jerking away as the wind caught the sails, and the stranger was gone, a blur of crimson back into the fray.

Thank you, she wanted to say, the words now lost with the rest of Stetriol.

The storm battered the water and caught up the ship, dragging it out into the bay.

Rollan leaned into the ship’s wheel while Tasha stood at the side, gripping the rail and watching her home crumble.

Abeke stared, too, feeling numb. What had an hour before been a vibrant city filled with fireworks and celebration was now a city plunged into madness and panic.

All those new buildings, thought Abeke. *All those fresh trees*.

A cry went up overhead, and she craned her neck to see a bird perched atop the mast. At first she thought it was Essix, but then lightning lit the sky and she saw the parrot’s colorful plumes. Relis!

Abeke was about to call up to the captain’s bird when she heard the creak of racing steps, too late. Essix screeched in warning and a shout went up—Rollan’s—from the other side of the ship, and then something lunged at Abeke, tackling her from behind.

She went down hard on the rain-streaked deck, her head hitting the wood and her vision crackling with light. And then it cleared, and she saw that the thing on top of her wasn’t a thing at all, but a dark-skinned woman with short black hair. Her cloak—once green—was stained by smoke and dirt and someone’s blood.

“Nisha,” gasped Abeke as the woman wrapped her clawlike fingers around Abeke’s throat. “Nisha!”

But it wasn’t Nisha, not anymore.

Her dark eyes were empty, and the spiral twitched on her forehead with her pulse. A guttural sound escaped the woman’s throat, but nothing more. None of the captain’s orders. None of the cheerful banter. Only a

hollow rasp. The parrot circled, and cried, unwilling to abandon her fallen captain, unwilling to attack in her stead.

On the deck, Abeke tried to fight Nisha off, but she had no strength left. Her head was pounding from the blow, and she couldn't breathe, let alone scream as a parasite crawled down Nisha's arm toward the hands wrapped around Abeke's throat.

A growl tore free, but it didn't come from her or the infected captain.

Uraza loped across the deck and fell on Nisha, tearing the woman backward by the hood of her cloak. The leopard held fast, shaking her from side to side before throwing her back into the ship's rail, where she lost her balance and went over. Nisha clawed at the air, but it was too late. She plunged down into the churning water, came up, choking and growling, and then went under.

Abeke gasped for air, got to her feet, and found Rollan struggling with another infected, one she recognized with sick despair. Arac. Arac, who had stayed on the ship with his captain, his wife, and fallen alongside her. The black spiral pulsed on his forehead above empty eyes.

"A little help!" choked Rollan as he fought to hold the man back. Tasha came stumbling forward—the swaying ship doing nothing to improve her balance—a bundle of coarse rope gathered in her arms. She tossed the net over the man. He thrashed like a fish, knotted up in the cords, and Rollan shoved him away. The ship rocked and Arac went rolling backward, a tangle of limbs that plunged over the edge and into the churning black water.

For a second, no one moved, every one of them coiled, braced for another attack. But neither Nisha nor Arac climbed back aboard.

At last, Rollan's legs buckled, and he sat down hard on the deck.

Essix landed on the wet boards, missing several feathers.

Tasha stood shivering, her back against a crate.

Abeke leaned hard against Uraza's damp fur.

She scoured the storm-black skies for the parrot, but he was gone.

No one spoke.

They were alive. They had escaped. But it could not be called a victory.

The rain was falling hard now, dousing the many fires, but it wasn't enough to stop the damage or save the people who had fallen. Abeke turned back and watched Stetriol shrink in the distance until nothing was left but smoke and sea.



17

NEWS AT SEA

THE *TELLUN'S PRIDE II* LOOKED LIKE A GHOST SHIP, DRIFTING through the mist-laced morning.

A vessel fit for a crew of thirty Greencloaks, it now held only three.

Rollan sat on the ship's deck, his back against the wheel, his head bobbing with fatigue. Essix perched on a bundle of rope beside him, preening her wet feathers. Abeke and Tasha were curled up on a tarp nearby. Rollan had found a spare green cloak and wrapped it around Tasha's trembling shoulders, and the two girls had collapsed as soon as the city was out of sight.

Uraza had retreated into her passive state after only an hour at sea, when the sloshing of the ocean and the persistent rain became too much for the leopard, leaving the three humans and Essix drifting toward home. Whether it was the fear of another attack, or the memory of Nisha and Arac and the rest of the crew left in Stetriol, none of them had been willing to go belowdecks. Instead they'd stayed above, braving the last of the weather. They shivered, but not from cold, and even though it went unspoken, Rollan thought they all needed the rain to wash away what had happened that night.

Now, every muscle in his body hurt. Even the ones he didn't know he had. He bore a split lip and more bruises than he could count. He hoped that, wherever Meilin was, she was having an easier time.

He kept a list in his head of all the things he'd tell Meilin when he saw her again. He spent the long hours of the stormy night trying to decide how he would recount Stetriol, not just the battle, but the changes

he'd seen in this land at the edge of Erdas: the little girl in the street, the laughter in the air, the mysterious fighters with their red cloaks and their animal masks. He was sure she'd have her own tales to tell.

Rollan yawned. The storm had passed before dawn, leaving only streaks of clouds in its wake, and as the sun finally rose, it turned the sky a bruised purple, then red, before finally showing the first signs of blue. A new day. His muscles begged for sleep, but his mind wouldn't let him rest. Every time he closed his eyes, Rollan saw Stetriol, its shape now lost from sight. He played it all back in his mind—the festival, the bond's strain, the attack—trying to figure out what was wrong.

Because something *was* wrong. About the night. About the battle.

It had been nagging at him for hours, a question, a name.

Zerif.

Where had the man been during the attack on the city? They'd faced his infected army in Stetriol, but not its leader, and while Rollan shuddered to think about what would have happened to them all if they'd had to face Zerif, too, with his stolen Great Beasts, it just didn't make sense.

Proud Zerif with his broad shoulders and his trimmed beard, his imperious voice and his cruel smile. Zerif was always at the center of his fights, taunting his opponents, calling out orders, relishing his victories.

But he hadn't been in Stetriol, and that made Rollan nervous, because if he wasn't in Stetriol, then where *was* he?

The bundle of green cloaks shifted on the deck beside him, and Tasha sat up, her white-blond hair, once neatly braided, now a messy, rain-curved nest around her head.

"Morning," said Rollan, trying and failing to keep the exhaustion from his voice.

"Where are we?" she asked, looking around. He realized that this girl had probably never seen the edges of her own city, let alone anything beyond.

"Well," said Rollan with a yawn, "we're somewhere between Stetriol and Greenhaven. I did pay *some* attention to Nisha when she was at the wheel. We don't have the whales, and the wind's not as strong, but I think I can get us home."

Home. The wrong word to use; he could see it in the pain that flickered across Tasha's face. Abeke stirred beside her, uncurling like a cat.

"What's it like?" asked Tasha, drawing her knees to her chest. "This Greenhaven?"

"It's a castle," said Rollan, "kind of like the one in Stetriol, only not as fancy." He tipped his head back against the crate. "It's more like a well-worn coat. Old stones and lots of green, but full of good people. You'll get to meet them all. And hopefully," he said, voice tightening, "hopefully our friends will be back by the time we arrive. Conor and Meilin. You would like them. But Olvan, he's the guy in charge, and he'll be there to welcome you ..."

He couldn't tell if Tasha was still listening. Her gaze had drifted out to sea. She wasn't looking ahead, toward Greenhaven, but back, toward Stetriol.

"Did this all happen because of me?" she whispered.

"No," said Rollan firmly. "This happened because of Zerif."

Abeke wrapped her arm around Tasha's shoulders. "It will be okay," she said, and they all knew the words weren't enough. But they had to be said. Something had to be said.

Rollan chewed his cheek and then sat forward. "I studied the plans for Stetriol's castle," he offered. "Back in Olvan's rooms, before we left Greenhaven." Tasha looked up at this, but still said nothing. "There are hidden doors," he went on, "pathways in and out of the castle. Ones that lead away from the city, some to the docks, and some farther inland. I'm sure that some people in the east and west wings knew about those doors."

"How can you know?" asked Tasha.

"I can't," he said. "But I can hope."

Rollan looked up, past the sails at the brightening sky, and frowned at the sight of a bird soaring toward them. It wasn't his falcon—Essix was still perched beside him—or one of the gulls he'd seen closer to land, but a *raven*. Essix saw it, too, head swiveling, and then she was airborne, winging swiftly toward it. Rollan got to his feet, squinting as the bird drew near, and then Essix's screech tore through the air as she charged it,

cutting off the raven's path, sharp talons forward. They struggled in midair, a tangle of wing and beak, before Essix sank her talons into the raven's wing.

"Essix!" he cried as the light caught the ribbon on the raven's dark ankle. "It's one of ours!" But it didn't make sense. Olvan used pigeons for messages. Why would he send a raven?

The falcon dove and deposited the raven rather roughly on the ship's deck before swooping to the rail and perching to watch.

The air caught in Rollan's throat.

It wasn't an ordinary raven.

It was Wikerus. His mother's spirit animal. But why would Olvan have used Wikerus? Was his mother at Greenhaven?

The raven struggled upright, fluttering his feathers indignantly as Rollan scooped him up, mumbled an apology, and freed the note from his foot.

Rollan's chest tightened.

The note wasn't from Olvan at all. It wasn't from Greenhaven.

The paper was bound with a yellow ribbon, and yellow meant *Lenori* at the Evertree. Rollan's chest ached at the thought of news, hope warring with fear. Had something happened? Why wasn't the message coming from Olvan himself? Why was his mother's bird so far from home? Had she gone to the tree? Or had Lenori borrowed the raven to send word? Rollan's fingers shook. Abeke was on her feet and beside him, one hand on his sleeve as he unrolled the slip to reveal the healer's small cursive.

Rollan's heart lurched as he read the words.

There was no mention of Conor, or Takoda, or Meilin.

Only three short lines.

Greenhaven has fallen.

Find Cabaro in Nilo.

Do not return.



18

GREENHAVEN HAS FALLEN

THE GREAT HALL AT GREENHAVEN WAS THICK WITH FEAR and smoke.

The first poured from the people, and the second poured from the hearth, where someone had cast a sack of powder into the fire, hoping to slow the intruders down. It had not worked, of course, and now the Greencloaks stood gathered in the center of the smoke-filled hall, corralled like cattle.

The long wooden table that once ran the length of the hall had been shoved against one wall, clearing the great stone space. Zerif stood atop it, his chest bare beneath his dark cloak, watching as his men, his *hands*—for that is how he thought of those marked by the seal, an extension of his body, his will—surrounded the men and women of Greenhaven, blocking them in.

Not cattle, he thought.

Mice.

He could smell their defiance, mingled with their fear, and he could not wait to strip them of it. The Wyrms' mark—the raised spiral on his forehead—pulsed faintly, writhing under his skin. With its rhythmic beat, the whispers wound their course through his head, guiding him, not the way they guided his *hands*, for he was not a mindless slave. No, these whispers were like those of a king to his trusted knight. And soon, Zerif would be much more than that.

Zerif spread his arms wide.

“Greencloaks,” he mused aloud. “The protectors of Erdas. The protectors of the Evertree. The protectors of the sacred bond between a human and a spirit animal. *Greencloaks*.” He sounded out the word. “Always so eager to be in control. No wonder you fear the loss of it so very much.”

He nodded at two of his *hands*, and the men dragged a Greencloak forward, one of his eyes swollen shut and blood running from his nose.

It was time to set an example.

Zerif let his arms fall back to his side.

“You all believe there is strength in being *chosen*,” he continued, stepping down from the table. “But I believe there is strength in *choosing*. In taking.” With a flick of his wrist, he produced a glass vial. Inside, two parasites squirmed, waiting for their hosts. “Summoning a spirit animal is not the only way to claim one.” His eyes fell on the Greencloak. His collar had been torn open, revealing the tattoo of a bear across his chest.

“Summon your spirit animal,” instructed Zerif.

The Greencloak spit on the hall floor between them. “*No*.”

Zerif considered the man, the spit, the vial. “Start breaking bones,” he said.

One of Zerif’s *hands* wrenched the captive’s arm behind his back, and the beginnings of his scream were cut off by Zerif’s command.

“No,” he said. “Not *his* bones.” He scanned the gathering of Greencloaks, then pointed to another one of their ranks. “*Hers*.”

Two more of his *hands* reached for the second Greencloak, a lean older woman. She twisted and fought, her colleagues trying to shield her, but Zerif’s men managed to wrest her from the pack.

“You won’t succeed,” she growled as the infected forced her to her knees. “You never will.”

Zerif ignored her. “Start with her fingers and toes,” he instructed.

“Please,” begged the man.

“Once you run out of bones,” Zerif went on, “kill her.”

“Stop!” said the man.

Zerif turned toward the man again, as if he’d forgotten he was there.

“If you want to spare her,” he said simply, tipping one of the parasites from the vial onto his dagger, the wormy darkness squirming on the blade, “then summon your spirit animal.”

“Don’t, Alon,” demanded the older woman. “It won’t stop him.”

“I said, start breaking bones.”

“Wait!” shouted the man, Alon. A sob escaped his throat, but in a flash of light, the bear was there before him. It reared furiously, teeth bared, but before it could attack, Zerif plunged the dagger with its parasite into the bear’s hide. Not a killing blow, of course; that would be a waste of such a splendid beast. The bear tore backward with a shudder and let out a single, strangled roar before coming down onto all four paws, the spiral pulsing in its forehead.

The man was still sobbing when Zerif took him by the jaw and tipped the second parasite into his mouth. The Greencloak struggled, but Zerif forced his hand over the man’s lips. He felt the man fight the parasite’s hold, watched the darkness creep like a vein up the man’s cheek, around his eyes, before drawing its mark on his forehead.

When Zerif’s hand fell away, the Greencloak knelt calmly, waiting for his orders.

One down.

Dozens to go. He turned back toward the woman, wondering who in the crowd she might care about. How tedious, to have to bend them one will at a time. Surely there was a better way.

He could feel the rising panic of the gathered Greencloaks, the murmurs of those desperate to fight back, and the soft protests of the others, terrified of what would happen if they tried.

“Listen close,” he said, gesturing with his dagger. “You have a choice. Your future is your own to decide. You can die now by my hand, or you can serve at my side. And before you answer, remember that death is a very permanent decision. And you choose not only for yourself, but for your spirit animals. Your friends. Your family. Your Greencloaks. From this moment forward, if *any* of you refuse my offer, I will kill *everyone*.”

Silence fell in the hall.

Zerif had learned in his many years that people were always willing to fight for their cause, and often willing to die for it, but rarely willing

to condemn others to death.

“Now,” he said with a cold smile, “who’s next?”



They all knelt, in the end.

Most of them no doubt harbored some secret hope that they would be free again one day and seek revenge. Let them dream. Zerif didn’t care *why* they knelt, or what they thought of as they surrendered, only that they did, swelling his ranks and cutting off the children’s allies. By the time he was done, there would be nowhere to run and no one to run to.

And soon his *hands* would return from Stetriol bearing three more Great Beasts, and he would be one step closer. The whispers in his head grew louder in agreement, the hush of praise and pride washing over him, urging him on.

The Greencloaks of Greenhaven had all bowed to his will.

All except one.

A woman appeared at his shoulder, the spiral throbbing in her forehead.

“Have you found their leader?” he asked.

The woman tipped her head and pointed at the stairs to the northern turret. Holed up in his own chamber, then. Fear made such cowards of the weak.

As he crossed the courtyard, Zerif saw the bird taking wing from Olvan’s chamber. A messenger.

One of Zerif’s men nocked an arrow, but he held out a hand.

“Let it fly,” he said with a menacing smile as he continued on. Let the old man spread the word while he still could. Greenhaven had fallen, and Zerif was winning.

Tethered in the corner of the courtyard was a moose. Olvan’s spirit animal. An incredible beast. Zerif was planning to keep that one for himself, add it to his personal collection, if there was room. He drew a hand absently over his chest as he reached the tower, tracing the patterns of his collected army. *Gerathon. Rumfuss. Halawir. Suka. Arax. Dinesh. Tellun.*

He recited the names like an incantation as he climbed the stairs.

Gerathon. Rumfuss. Halawir. Suka. Arax. Dinesh. Tellun.

All his.

Zerif reached the landing outside the old man's chamber. Two of his *hands* stood guard beside the door, their expressions empty. There had been a time when Zerif wanted passion from his followers. Devotion. Belief. But those things had proved fickle. They could not be trusted. This—servitude—was the true way to power.

Zerif stepped forward and pressed his ear to the wood. Beyond, he could hear Olvan's scrambling steps, the scribble of his pen on parchment.

"A coward's choice, Olvan," said Zerif calmly, "to not stand with your men and women in the great hall. Not very leaderlike at all."

Olvan didn't answer, but Zerif could tell by the hesitation in his steps that he had heard.

"No matter," continued Zerif. "You are not their leader anymore."

He drew another vial from the pocket of his cloak and held it up to the light. Inside, the oily shape of the parasite shifted and slithered like a snail without its shell. From some angles, it looked like smoke, from others, like ink, or grease, or damp earth. It was none of those things.

It was darkness.

A sliver of the Wyrn, a seed set free to find fresh soil and take root.

"You will not win in the end, Zerif," came Olvan's voice through the wood. "I will not see it happen."

Zerif uncorked the vial and knelt, setting the glass on its side at the base of the door.

"It *is* the end," he said, "and I have already won."

The parasite slid—less like a worm than a snake—from the glass enclosure, vanishing beneath the door. "But you are right about one thing, Olvan. You will not see it happen."

He waited several long moments, and then, beyond the wooden door, at last, the sounds of struggle. A gasp. The crash as a metal pot and a pile of books were swept from a table, and moments later, silence.

Zerif could feel the new link, a pulse in his forehead as Olvan's will became his, and he smiled, knowing that he had claimed the leader of the Greencloaks.

He pressed a hand to the wood. “Open the door,” he commanded.

The spiral twitched in his skin, met by the footsteps across the floor, the sliding of the bolt, the creak of the wood.

Zerif considered the old man, his gray hair, his strong eyes now empty. The great Olvan, nothing but a puppet now.

“Put him with the others,” ordered Zerif. He stepped past the old man and into the chamber, eyes trailing over the wreckage of ink and pots. At the window he looked down on the courtyard, where his *hands* were gathering, their masses now mixed with figures in forest green. And for every man and woman, a beast.

They watched him, marked faces turned up, and waited for his orders.

Zerif turned away, and instead of going down to meet them, he went up, up a second set of stairs that led from the leader’s chamber onto the battlements above.

From here, he could see the sea that stretched away, toward Stetriol, the hills of Eura, the mountains of Amaya. And even though he could not see the Evertree, he could feel its pull, or rather, he could feel the pull of the thing that lived beneath its roots, waiting to be free.

The wind caught Zerif’s cloak, ran through his dark hair, brushed over the black tattoos that marked his tan skin.

Gerathon. Rumpfuss. Halawir. Suka. Arax. Dinesh. Tellun.

He traced their patterns on his chest, his arms, felt where they wrapped around his ribs and back. Their markings ran together, tail to claw, horn to wing, twisting over him like armor.

The whispers in his head began to coalesce, drawing together from many voices into one. A voice that rumbled and rustled and hissed. A voice that changed its shape as often as the parasite. The Wyrms were getting stronger, and so was Zerif.

And strength, like everything, had two sides.

A body had to be strong enough to face the dangers from without, *and* the trials from within. Too often people thought only of the outside threats. But what good was a body if it was strong enough to fight off attackers, but not *infection*?

What *was* a body, if not a shell, a conduit, meant to harness one’s power, and express one’s will?

Gerathon the Serpent.

Rumfuss the Boar.

Halawir the Eagle.

Suka the Polar Bear.

Arax the Ram.

Dinesh the Elephant.

Tellun the Elk.

Every beast made him stronger. Every beast brought him closer. The markings coiled and curved and charged across his skin. Even in their passive forms, he could feel their strength, their skill, their cunning. The talismans had given him gifts, but none so great as these. The Great Beasts woke to his command and slept against his skin.

He looked down and considered the stretches of unmarked skin.

There was room for more.

Room for Mulop the Octopus, and Cabaro the Lion.

Room for Ninani the Swan, and Kovo the Ape.

Room for Jhi the Panda, and Uraza the Leopard.

Room for Essix the Falcon, and Briggan the Wolf.

The spiral pulsed, and the whispers rose in a chorus, and beneath the roots of the Evertree, the Wurm strained against its prison, longing to be free.

“Soon,” said Zerif to the thing beneath the world. “Soon, I will be strong enough. Soon, I will be ready for you.”

And then, thought Zerif with a wicked smile, I will be unstoppable.

Victoria Schwab is the author of nearly a dozen books for children, teens, and adults, including *The Archived* and *A Darker Shade of Magic*. When she's not wandering the Scottish countryside or huddled in a French cafe, she's curled up in her Nashville home with two big dogs and two noisy cats, drinking tea and dreaming up monsters.

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A sneak peek of the next



Book Three

The Return

By Varian Johnson



ZERIF JAMMED HIS FINGERS INTO A SMALL CREVICE AND climbed onto the narrow, rocky ledge. Ahead, the majestic peaks of the Kenjoba Mountains stretched before him. Below, he could still hear the shouts of the Niloan warriors and Greencloaks in pursuit. They had been chasing him for days. He thought that he would be able to hide in one of the villages in South Nilo, but it had only taken a few days for someone to turn on him and alert the authorities. He bolted as soon as he saw the first Greencloak roaming the small village.

Now that the war was over, Zerif found that very few of his allies remained. Most of the Conquerors had surrendered as soon as they lost control over their spirit animals, thanks to the destruction of the Evertree canceling the effects of Gerathon's Bile. The few warriors that still pledged allegiance to the Reptile King wanted nothing to do with Zerif—and would have probably turned him over to the Greencloaks themselves if they found him.

Not even Zerif's jackal remained. Like the other animals, it had abandoned him as soon as he lost his power to control it.

He was glad that he hadn't bothered to name it.

No matter, he thought. I am Zerif. I will triumph again. As always.

Zerif climbed to another ledge, scraping his hands and face as he pulled himself up. His blue tunic, ripped and withered, flapped against him in the howling winds. The breeze shifted direction, and suddenly the stench of rot filled Zerif's nostrils. He looked around. To his right, on another ledge, large black buzzards picked at the remains of an animal.

Zerif backed up to gain as much running ground as possible. Then he took off, his weakened legs flailing as he leaped through the air. He landed on the ledge and stumbled, almost falling over into the deep, empty valley below. Once he was sure of his footing, he charged toward the birds, driving them away.

Zerif peered at the rotting carcass. There wasn't much left of the wild dog—a few slivers of flesh hung on the otherwise dry bones, and the beast's fur was torn and ripped. Still, he picked up what remained of the animal and flung it over his shoulder. One of the Greencloaks had been traveling with a fox; he hoped the dead animal would help mask his own scent.

After a few more hours of climbing, Zerif stumbled upon a long fissure in the rock face. It took some effort, but he crawled through. Sparse patches of green moss covered the slick, cool walls of the small cavern. The cave was barely big enough for him to sit up in, much less stand. He was shivering so much that his teeth rattled and his fingers were blue, but he didn't dare light a fire.

Anger seethed from him. This was not what was supposed to happen when he allied himself with the Conquerors. They had failed him.

Zerif dropped the carcass beside him and curled himself into a tight ball. He would wait and plan. Eventually, the Greencloaks would abandon their pursuit.

And then, very soon, he would be great and powerful once again.



Two days later, he still hadn't crawled out of the cave.

Every time he considered leaving, he thought he heard the footsteps of Greencloaks or the shouts of Niloan warriors. Perhaps it was just the wind. Or the sound of rocks tumbling down the mountain. Maybe he was hallucinating. He had tried to eat moss to gain strength but had retched the bitter vegetation back up as soon as it hit his stomach.

It was there, lying with his face pressed against the ground, that he first saw the gray worm inching toward him.

It was small and strange-looking. And fluid—almost like a coil of smoke. It moved toward him with an eerie purpose, as if it knew he was

there. Zerif had never seen anything like it.

What is this? A leech? A snail?

And is it edible?

Zerif shook his head as he considered what to do. *Has the mighty Zerif fallen so low that the idea of eating a worm excites him?*

He picked up the worm, hoping to study it. It wriggled up his hand much quicker than he had anticipated. Before he knew it, it was at his elbow. He shook his arm furiously, but the worm remained. It burrowed its way into a deep gash on Zerif's shoulder. Panicked, he hurled himself into the wall, hoping to crush the thing. When that didn't work, he picked up a jagged rock and tried to cut the worm out of his skin.

Nothing seemed to stop the creature. It inched its way beneath his skin, up to his collarbone, then neck, then face. Zerif could feel it writhing. He screamed—both in fear and in pain. He felt it curling at his forehead.

Zerif twisted, clawing at his face, driving deep gouges into his skin.

And then, Zerif fell silent. His legs and arms ceased to move. They no longer belonged to him.

Slowly, he heard ancient whispers echoing in his mind. Soft at first, they intensified, feeding the anger and evil already residing in the depths of his soul.

Power surged inside him. He rose to his feet, no longer hungry or pained. He sensed the voice telling him to leave. To travel north. A being of great power would be there. An eagle.

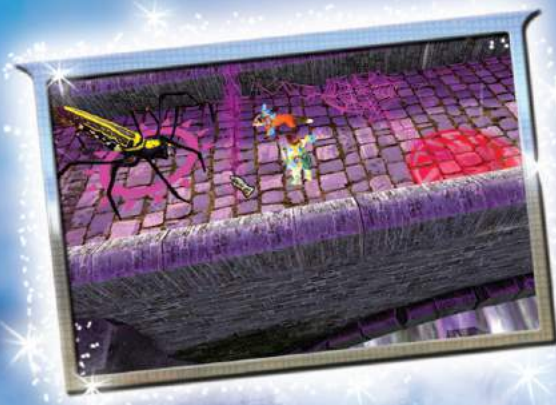
Halawir.

Suddenly, Zerif found himself surrounded by hundreds of small gray worms. They crept from rocks, seeping out like liquid darkness. Parasites. Allies.

With their help, Zerif would be great once again.

He would be feared and worshipped.

He would rule the world.



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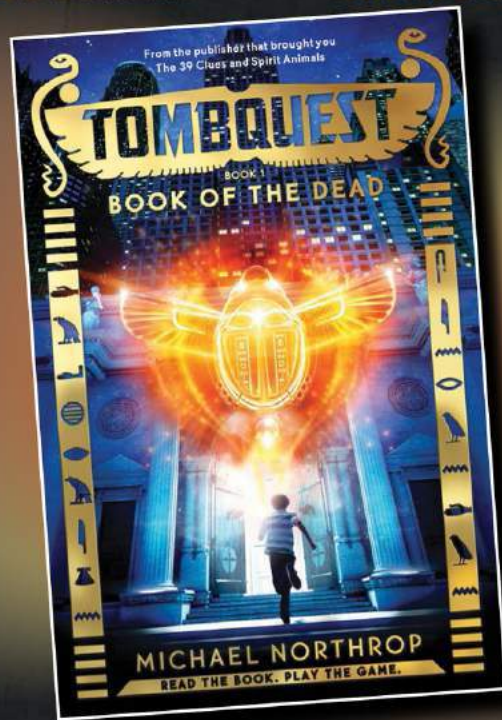
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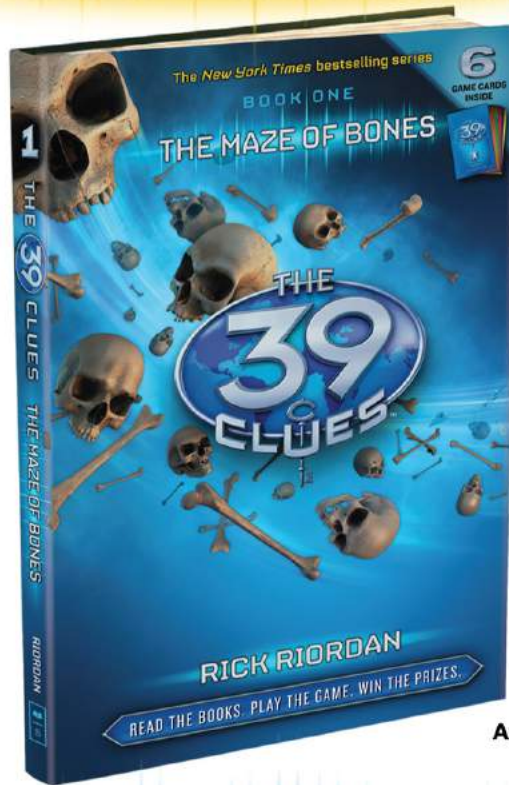
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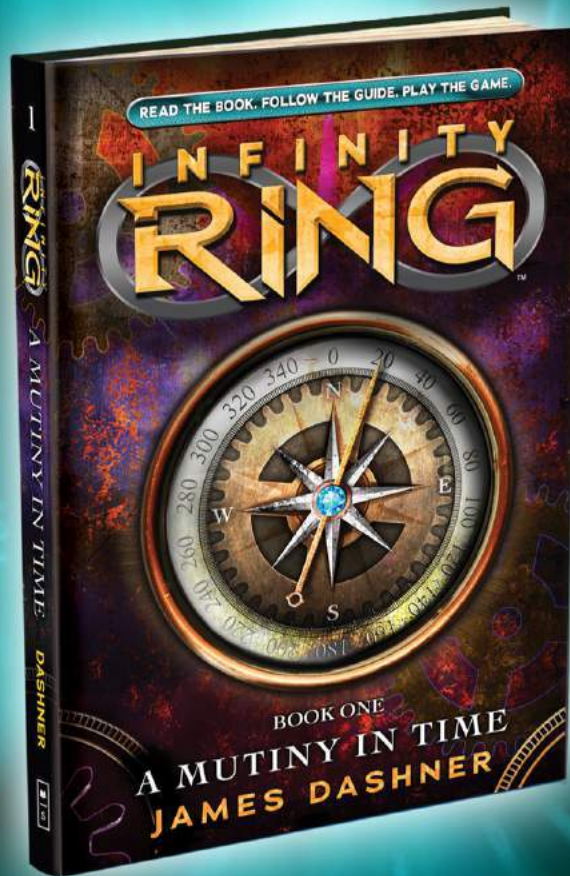


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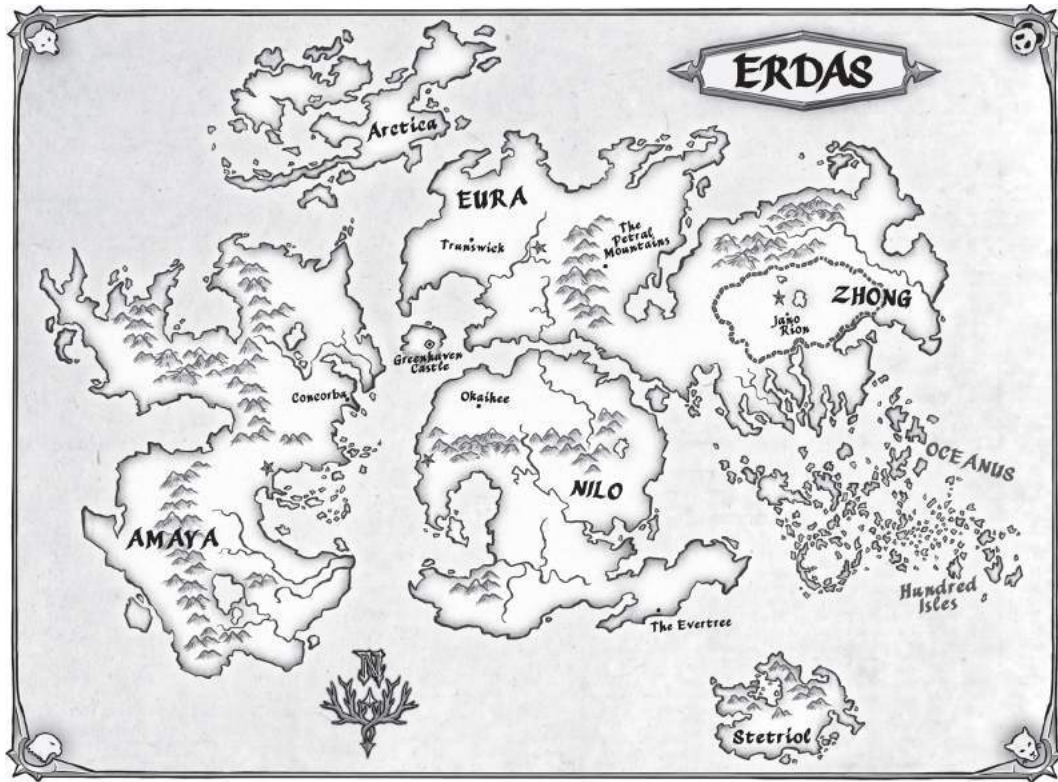


FALL of the BEASTS
SPIRIT
ANIMAS™
THE RETURN

Varian Johnson



SCHOLASTIC INC.



*For Savannah, Sydney, Elisabeth, Adrienne, Daniel, Tex, John Marcus,
Aidan, and Nadia. And for Theo and Sebastian, two dogs that never met
an apple they didn't like.*

—V. J.

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ZERIF

ZERIF JAMMED HIS FINGERS INTO A SMALL CREVICE AND climbed onto the narrow, rocky ledge. Ahead, the majestic peaks of the Kenjoba Mountains stretched before him. Below, he could still hear the shouts of the Niloan warriors and Greencloaks in pursuit. They had been chasing him for days. He thought that he would be able to hide in one of the villages in South Nilo, but it had only taken a few days for someone to turn on him and alert the authorities. He bolted as soon as he saw the first Greencloak roaming the small village.

Now that the war was over, Zerif found that very few of his allies remained. Most of the Conquerors had surrendered as soon as they lost control over their spirit animals, thanks to the destruction of the Evertree canceling the effects of Gerathon's Bile. The few warriors that still pledged allegiance to the Reptile King wanted nothing to do with Zerif—and would have probably turned him over to the Greencloaks themselves if they found him.

Not even Zerif's jackal remained. Like the other animals, it had abandoned him as soon as he lost his power to control it.

He was glad that he hadn't bothered to name it.

No matter, he thought. I am Zerif. I will triumph again. As always.

Zerif climbed to another ledge, scraping his hands and face as he pulled himself up. His blue tunic, ripped and withered, flapped against him in the howling winds. The breeze shifted direction, and suddenly the stench of rot filled Zerif's nostrils. He looked around. To his right, on another ledge, large black buzzards picked at the remains of an animal.

Zerif backed up to gain as much running ground as possible. Then he took off, his weakened legs flailing as he leaped through the air. He landed on the ledge and stumbled, almost falling over into the deep, empty valley below. Once he was sure of his footing, he charged toward the birds, driving them away.

Zerif peered at the rotting carcass. There wasn't much left of the wild dog—a few slivers of flesh hung on the otherwise dry bones, and the beast's fur was torn and ripped. Still, he picked up what remained of the animal and flung it over his shoulder. One of the Greencloaks had been traveling with a fox; he hoped the dead animal would help mask his own scent.

After a few more hours of climbing, Zerif stumbled upon a long fissure in the rock face. It took some effort, but he crawled through. Sparse patches of green moss covered the slick, cool walls of the small cavern. The cave was barely big enough for him to sit up in, much less stand. He was shivering so much that his teeth rattled and his fingers were blue, but he didn't dare light a fire.

Anger seethed from him. This was not what was supposed to happen when he allied himself with the Conquerors. They had failed him.

Zerif dropped the carcass beside him and curled himself into a tight ball. He would wait and plan. Eventually, the Greencloaks would abandon their pursuit.

And then, very soon, he would be great and powerful once again.



Two days later, he still hadn't crawled out of the cave.

Every time he considered leaving, he thought he heard the footsteps of Greencloaks or the shouts of Niloan warriors. Perhaps it was just the wind. Or the sound of rocks tumbling down the mountain. Maybe he was hallucinating. He had tried to eat moss to gain strength but had retched the bitter vegetation back up as soon as it hit his stomach.

It was there, lying with his face pressed against the ground, that he first saw the gray worm inching toward him.

It was small and strange-looking. And fluid—almost like a coil of smoke. It moved toward him with an eerie purpose, as if it knew he was

there. Zerif had never seen anything like it.

What is this? A leech? A snail?

And is it edible?

Zerif shook his head as he considered what to do. *Has the mighty Zerif fallen so low that the idea of eating a worm excites him?*

He picked up the worm, hoping to study it. It wriggled up his hand much quicker than he had anticipated. Before he knew it, it was at his elbow. He shook his arm furiously, but the worm remained. It burrowed its way into a deep gash on Zerif's shoulder. Panicked, he hurled himself into the wall, hoping to crush the thing. When that didn't work, he picked up a jagged rock and tried to cut the worm out of his skin.

Nothing seemed to stop the creature. It inched its way beneath his skin, up to his collarbone, then neck, then face. Zerif could feel it writhing. He screamed—both in fear and in pain. He felt it curling at his forehead.

Zerif twisted, clawing at his face, driving deep gouges into his skin.

And then, Zerif fell silent. His legs and arms ceased to move. They no longer belonged to him.

Slowly, he heard ancient whispers echoing in his mind. Soft at first, they intensified, feeding the anger and evil already residing in the depths of his soul.

Power surged inside him. He rose to his feet, no longer hungry or pained. He sensed the voice telling him to leave. To travel north. A being of great power would be there. An eagle.

Halawir.

Suddenly, Zerif found himself surrounded by hundreds of small gray worms. They crept from rocks, seeping out like liquid darkness. Parasites. Allies.

With their help, Zerif would be great once again.

He would be feared and worshipped.

He would rule the world.



RIPPLES

TAKODA SAT AT THE EDGE OF THE SULFUR SEA. YELLOW, gritty water lapped onto his boots, seeping the worn leather, but he did not want to move inland. This location gave him the best view of the endless sea, the jagged cliffs, and the small strip of beach in between.

Takoda kept searching, hoping to catch a flash of Xanthe's pale skin or white hair. He knew she would find them. She had to. He refused to believe otherwise.

How long had it been since he'd last seen her, when they were running through the Arachane Fields? Hours? Days? Longer? Although he'd only known her for a short amount of time, Takoda had come to enjoy their long talks. She seemed just as fascinated about his life with the monks as he had been about hers belowground. She wasn't just their guide. She was their friend. *His* friend. And now she was gone. Just like his parents during the war.

Farther along the shoreline, Meilin and Conor hollowed out a large purple gourd. They'd found a field of them while exploring one of the cliff caves. The fruit reeked, almost making Takoda lose the little bit of food remaining in his stomach. But after an initial test, it looked like the hard shell could hold them all for a journey across the sea.

Takoda heard steps behind him but didn't turn around. Even the soft sand of the Sulfur Sea could not mute the heavy, lumbering footsteps of Kovo, the Great Beast. His spirit animal.

A few weeks ago, Takoda wouldn't have needed to rely on footsteps or snorts to know that Kovo was approaching. Before, Kovo's presence

hovered just at the edge of his own thoughts. While strange in the beginning, Takoda had come to like the feeling. It reminded him of the quiet, constant buzz of a hummingbird as it neared a flower. But now, as the bonds between spirit animals and their human partners continued to stretch, he could hardly sense the ape anymore.

At first, Takoda thought this would be a blessing. If the bonds broke, perhaps he might finally be rid of Kovo, the cunning, treacherous mastermind responsible for Erdas's two great wars. But now, Takoda couldn't imagine life without him.

In addition, ever since bonding with Kovo, the anger and ache Takoda felt due to the deaths of his parents had dulled. It was there, but subdued. It didn't consume him. He could cope with it. But now, Xanthe's loss had amplified everything.

Kovo dropped a large handful of rockweed beside Takoda. Without Xanthe, Takoda and the others didn't know the difference between vegetation that would sustain them or would make them sick—or worse. Finally, Meilin had discovered a growth of rockweed during one of her explorations. Xanthe had shown them the strange weeds earlier in their journey and taught them how to eat it to draw out its nutrients. Xanthe was still saving them, even now that she was missing.

Kovo pushed Takoda's shoulder, causing the boy to look up and meet his gaze. Takoda was often surprised how gentle the Great Ape's touch could be. Once Kovo was sure he had Takoda's attention, he pinched his fingers and motioned to his mouth.

"Thank you," Takoda said. "But what about Conor and Meilin? Have they eaten?"

Takoda wasn't sure, but it almost looked like Kovo rolled his large red eyes at the mention of their companions.

Kovo and Meilin didn't like each other. They would never admit it, but they were similar in many ways. Both were leaders who *demand*ed information, when asking would have been much simpler.

As far as Conor was concerned, Takoda wondered if Kovo had already given up on him. Conor's sickness worsened as each day passed. The parasite's journey up the boy's arm had slowed, but not stopped. It would soon overtake him.

Takoda picked up some of the rockweed and tried to give it back to the ape. “Kovo, they need to eat, too. And it would probably help them feel more comfortable around you if you were the one that offered it.”

Kovo snorted, then returned back up the beach, knuckling toward the cliffs, his fists pounding into the beach. He kicked up sand as he walked away, covering the abandoned rockweed with grit and grime.

Takoda sighed as he rose to his feet. He shook as much sand from the rockweed as he could, then walked toward Conor and Meilin. He’d tried to help with cleaning the gourd earlier, but Meilin had sent him away when it became clear that Takoda was spending more time watching the sea than scraping away the stinking fruit.

Briggan leaped to his feet and playfully circled Takoda as he approached.

“Sorry, but no meat, I’m afraid,” Takoda said.

Briggan whimpered, then returned to Conor’s side. The wolf had remained close to Conor ever since the fire, even though Briggan appeared to dislike the feel of the black sand on his paws.

“Kovo found some more rockweed,” Takoda said to Conor. Sweat covered Conor’s forehead, and Takoda wondered if it was from the work ... or from the parasite curled at the base of his neck. He understood why Meilin was pushing them so hard. They were running out of time.

“Thanks,” Conor mumbled. “I could use a break.”

“Are you sure it’s real rockweed?” Meilin asked as she continued to scrape away at the gourd. “I wouldn’t put it past Kovo to feed us something poisonous.”

Takoda shook his head. “Will you ever learn to trust him?”

“No,” Meilin said, her voice curt.

Takoda started to laugh, then stopped when he realized that Meilin was serious. He took some of the ropy plant and placed it in his mouth. “It’s rockweed,” he said as he chewed. “That I am positive of.”

“Good. We’ll need to gather as much as we can for the trip.” Meilin dropped the stone that she had been using to clean the gourd and flexed her hands. They were red and raw from all the work. “What do you think, Conor?” she asked. “Good enough?”

After he didn’t answer, Briggan nudged the boy with his nose.

Conor blinked, then looked from the wolf to Meilin. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

“Nothing important,” she said. Meilin closed her eyes, touched the tattoo on the back of her hand, and grimaced. A few long seconds later, Jhi appeared. “Why don’t you get some rest? Jhi will help with the infection while Takoda and I finish gathering the supplies for the trip. We can leave once we return.”

Takoda’s heartbeat sped up. He spat the rockweed from his mouth. “So soon? Maybe you should rest, too. Kovo and I can take the first watch—”

“No way,” Meilin snapped.

“Even if you don’t trust Kovo, you can trust me.” He rustled the green cloak around his shoulders. “Don’t forget, we’re on the same side.”

Jhi, who had been attending to Conor, now paused to watch the exchange between Takoda and Meilin. Her black ears twitched as she sat down, her heavy body settling softly into the sand. She leaned over to give Conor’s skin another lick with her tongue, but her gaze remained on Takoda.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Meilin said. “It’s just that we’re running out of time.” She circled their makeshift boat so she was standing in front of Takoda. “And waiting an extra day won’t bring her back.”

As direct as she was, Meilin might as well have shoved a knife into his heart. “How do you know?” Takoda asked heatedly. He could hear the anger in his voice. The monks would have been displeased. “Xanthe knows these caves better than any of us. She’ll eventually find her way to us.”

“Takoda.” Meilin’s voice was soft, which just made Takoda more upset. “It’s been at least two days. She would have found us by now, if she could.” She looked across the sea. “Official Greencloak or not, you have a duty to save Sadre *for* Xanthe. It’s what she would want.”

Takoda wondered if there would even be anyone left in Sadre to save. So many had already fallen to the Wyrms and its parasites.

“Help me gather some materials for the trip,” she said, placing her hand on his shoulder. “We still need something to use as a paddle.”

He shook her hand off. “I don’t know if I could ever be an *official* Greencloak, if it means becoming this cold. I suppose the great Meilin of Zhong must not know how it feels to lose someone important to her.”

Meilin’s eyes widened, then narrowed just as quickly. “Fine. Stay here and feel sorry for yourself. I’ll gather the materials on my own.” She turned and stormed up the beach.

Takoda watched her disappear into a cave. There was a bitter taste in his mouth that had little to do with the rockweed.

He caught sight of Jhi, still staring at him. Their eyes locked, and Takoda felt her enter his mind. Slowly, everything fueling his anger began to fade away. The ache in his stomach from hunger, the sadness from losing Xanthe and his parents, and even the hopelessness of their mission all dulled inside him.

After Takoda’s heart had returned to a normal pace, Jhi released him. Then she looked toward the cave where Meilin had disappeared.

Takoda blew out a deep breath, then circled the gourd and approached Jhi and Conor. The anger that had filled Takoda before was now replaced with shame. “Thank you, Jhi,” he said, kneeling in front of her. “Conor, do you think Jhi wants me to go after Meilin?”

“Better let her calm down first,” Conor said. He gave Jhi a few pats on the head, right between her ears. “But *you* can follow Meilin if you want,” he said to the panda. Jhi looked at Conor and tilted her head. “It’s okay,” Conor continued. “We both know that there isn’t much more you can do for me, anyways.”

Jhi gave him one last lick across the face, then ambled across the beach toward Meilin. Using the edge of the gourd as a brace, Conor rose from the ground, but he struggled to gain his footing in the sand.

“Let me help,” Takoda said, jumping to his feet. He took Conor’s arm and flung it over his shoulder, and pretended not to notice the parasite wiggling above Conor’s collarbone.

They walked to the base of the cliffs, where they had set up a makeshift camp.

The cliffs stretched so high that it was impossible to tell where they ended and the top of the large cavern began. They had fallen from up above, somewhere, in their rush to escape the burning fields.

The last time Takoda had seen Xanthe, her eyes were wide as she waved at them, trying to warn them to stop. Then, at the last second, she leaped out of the way as he, Conor, and Kovo crashed into Meilin and went tumbling over the ledge.

Once at camp, Conor sank into the sand and unfastened his cloak. “Meilin can be a little stubborn, but she means well. There’s no one else you’d want with you in a battle.”

Briggan lay down beside Conor and placed his muzzle in the boy’s lap.

“I mean, after Briggan, of course.” The animal seemed to grin at this.

“If you thought Meilin was mad a minute ago, you should have seen her when I suggested that you all leave me behind,” Conor continued. “I thought she was going to punch me.”

“I have much to learn about her,” Takoda said. “About people in general. The monks in Nilo were not as ... spirited as she is.”

“I’ll talk to her when she returns. Meilin doesn’t want to admit it, but she needs rest as much as any of us.” Conor sighed. “But she’s right about Xanthe. We can’t wait for her. We have to keep moving.”

Takoda turned toward the sea. If Xanthe was out there, would she see their camp? Or was it too hidden from view?

“Her father,” Conor said.

Takoda snapped back around. “What?”

“Meilin lost her father during the war. The war that Kovo started.” Conor patted Briggan’s flank. “I was there when General Teng died. The Devourer’s crocodile killed him. I watched Meilin as she cried over his body,” Conor said. “Then she stood up, wiped her eyes, and returned to her duty.” Conor lay down beside Briggan. “She knows about loss, Takoda. More than any of us.”

“What happened to her mother?” Takoda asked. Was she a warrior, too? Had she died during the war, like his mother had?

“She died a long time ago. I don’t know the details.” Conor yawned. “Sorry, I just need to rest for a little while. It’s taking everything I have to fight ...”

“To fight the parasite?” Takoda finished.

“No. To fight the Wurm.” Conor glanced at Takoda through lidded eyes. “I can feel it. The closer we get to it, the louder it becomes in my head. Like it’s pulling me to it.”

Takoda watched as Conor closed his eyes. “Does sleep help?” he asked.

“A little,” Conor replied. “For now.”



Takoda wasn’t sure how much time Meilin and Jhi spent exploring the caves. Their time on the beach usually seemed to crawl by at a tortoise’s pace, but with all the chores Takoda had completed while she was gone, he finally stopped counting the seconds.

Takoda didn’t actually notice their return at first. It was Kovo who alerted him to it. The Great Ape sniffed the air, then made a clawing gesture over his face. *Cranky*. It was what he called Meilin.

A few seconds later, Meilin and her spirit animal came into view. “I didn’t find much,” Meilin said once she reached camp. “A little rockweed, and some vines we can use as a rope.”

Takoda nodded toward the stick in her hand. “And a new quarterstaff?”

She shrugged. “It’s not as long as I’d like, but it will come in handy if we’re attacked from the water.”

“Kovo and I went out as well. We gathered some rockweed, and even found a few of these.” He moved his cloak, showing off two small spheres. “They aren’t as bright as Xanthe’s glowstones, but they will help us to preserve our last wooden torch.” Takoda covered the orbs, then dragged a large mushroom stalk into his lap.

“What is that?” Meilin asked.

“Our oar,” Takoda replied. “I found it while scavenging the shore. Kovo helped me break off the mushroom cap and drag the stalk here. Its fibers are strong—almost like wood—but I think I can sand it down enough to make a handle.”

She was already shaking her head. “It’s much too big to use.”

“For us,” Takoda said. “But not for Kovo.”

Meilin pressed her lips together as she stared at the Great Beast. Kovo stared back, his eyes like red pinholes against his black fur. Meilin brushed her hair from her face. “I suppose we don’t have much choice.”

Takoda rose to his feet and leaned against the half-made paddle. “Sleep. I’ll stand watch while I finish sanding this down.”

“No, I’m—”

“I’m not only suggesting this for your benefit, or because I want to stay on the beach.” Takoda glanced at Conor. Jhi had already returned to the boy’s side. “Conor could use as much rest as we can allow. I promise we’ll leave as soon as you both wake up. I won’t fight you about it.” Takoda waited for Meilin to sit down, then added, “And I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I shouldn’t have been so careless with my words. Anyone who’s faced as many battles as you have was sure to lose loved ones.”

“I guess Conor told you about my father.” She shook her head and gave off a mix of a snort and a huff. “He talks too much.”

“Or perhaps you don’t talk enough.”

Meilin unfastened her cloak and folded it to use as a pillow. “There’s an ancient Zhongese saying: The time of the bamboo flowering comes to us all. It’s the life we lead that matters.”

“The monks have a similar saying,” Takoda said. “It’s not the size of the pebble dropped into a pond that defines our impact on the world—but the ripples that remain in its wake.” He picked up the stone he had been using to shape the oar. “My parents died during the war, too. My mother was a warrior. She died defending Nilo from the Conquerors. My father died while buying me time to escape.”

Meilin blinked at Takoda, her face full of surprise. “I never knew that,” she said softly.

Takoda shrugged. “Perhaps I don’t talk enough, either.”

Meilin glanced at Kovo. The ape had turned from Meilin and was instead looking out at the sea. “How can you stand being bonded to him, knowing what he did? What he was responsible for?”

“When I first called him, I wondered the same thing,” Takoda said. “But the bond actually helps me to deal with the anger. Well, at least it *did*, until Xanthe ...” He turned from Meilin because he didn’t want her

to see that his eyes were beginning to water. “Kovo isn’t evil. Not really. He just sees himself as the best protector of Erdas.”

“By starting two wars?” Meilin mumbled. “Yeah, that’s a great way to show your love for Erdas.”

Takoda finally laughed. “You should get some rest. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Takoda walked away, dragging the stalk along with him. Kovo followed a few steps behind. Then Takoda stopped halfway across the beach and sank into the sand. He knew his hands would be just as red and raw as Meilin’s once he finished with the oar. It was a small price to pay, given the gravity of their mission.

Kovo gently pushed Takoda’s shoulder, then pointed toward the spot where Takoda usually sat.

Takoda shook his head. “I don’t have time to waste, looking out at the sea. There’s too much to do before Meilin and Conor wake up. And they’re right. There’s nothing more I can do for Xanthe.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “She was the pebble. We must be the ripples.”

Kovo knelt in front of Takoda. His eyes were so large. So red. But not angry—at least, not right then. Kovo grunted, then closed his hand into a fist and made a small circle motion across his chest.

Takoda sat up. “You’re ... *sorry*?” he asked. Kovo had never used that word before. “I didn’t think you even liked Xanthe.”

Kovo pointed to Takoda, then placed his two pointer fingers together. Kovo followed this gesture by bringing his open hands down in front of his face.

“Yes, I’m hurt,” Takoda said. “And very sad.” Takoda could hardly believe the conversation that he was having with Kovo. Takoda had always assumed that the ape saw him as a necessary nuisance. Was it possible that Kovo actually *cared* for him?

He studied Kovo’s face, looking for the arrogance and contempt that usually resided there. Finding none of that, he took his hand, placed it against his lips, then brought it down to his lap. “Thank you, Kovo.” Then he formed a fist and slowly repeated the gesture that the Great Beast had just made. “And ... I’m sorry, too.”



DANTE

STANDING ABOARD THE *TELLUN'S PRIDE II*, ABEKE'S HEART swelled as she stared at the sand-colored rocky cliffs in the distance. Nilo. Home. Although the busy port towns along the northern border were very different from Okaihee, the idea of being on familiar ground made her ache for the savannah.

Abeke looked up at the sunny sky and floating clouds. The winds blew in their favor, filling the ship's sails and pushing them that much closer to Nilo. The *Tellun's Pride II* was not meant to be manned by a crew of three, but she, Rollan, and Tasha were making do. She and Rollan had traveled on enough ships in their short time as Greencloaks to understand how to hoist the sails, secure the decks, and steer the ship. They'd found the waters tucked between Nilo and Eura were much calmer than the open sea. Almost pleasant. Out of all of them, it was only Uraza that seemed bothered by the constant, buoyant rhythm of the ship.

Uraza remained still as Abeke reached down and petted her flank. She knew the leopard would rather be in passive state than walking around the boat. The Great Beast had spent the entire trip moaning and growling, her strong legs unsure on the wooden planks. But Abeke couldn't bring herself to call Uraza to her passive state. Abeke could still feel the effects of the last bond-breaking incident. It had felt like her skin—her bones—had been ablaze. And afterward, there was so much silence between her and Uraza. So much distance. She could hardly feel

Uraza now. And what if Uraza was in her passive state when the bonds completely severed? What would happen to them both?

Suddenly, Abeke found herself thinking of the Greencloaks who had been infected. What had happened to their spirit animals? And what of Conor and Briggan? Was he still fighting the infection, or had he turned into a mindless slave like so many others?

“I’m sorry,” Abeke said to Uraza. She put her face close to the leopard’s nose. “I know you’re uncomfortable, but I can’t take the chance of losing you permanently.”

Abeke looked up as a shadow approached.

“Am I interrupting something?” Rollan asked with a grin on his face. He’d been trying to keep the mood light, always ready with a new joke or story—most of them dreadfully painful. But today was the first time that she’d seen Tasha smile since their escape from Stetriol. They all deserved a bit of joy before their next mission.

“Don’t be jealous just because Uraza and I are closer than you and Essix,” Abeke said, with a hint of laughter in her voice.

“Hey, Essix and I have a great relationship. She stays out of my way, and I stay out of hers.” Rollan’s chest swelled as he looked up. “She knows where to find me when she needs me.”

“When she needs *you*?”

“Okay, okay.” Rollan shrugged. “Maybe it’s the other way around.”

“You’re both loners at heart.” Abeke patted Uraza one last time before rising to her feet. “Does that make it ... easier?”

Rollan took a deep breath. Abeke knew she didn’t have to explain what she was trying to ask. “We’ve always been more distant,” he said. “If something happened with the bonds and they actually broke, I think she’d be okay without me.” Rollan flapped his green cloak. “And who’s a loner now?”

Abeke noticed that he didn’t say how *he* would fare without Essix. “And how is Tasha?”

“Better. She went downstairs to change. I guess she doesn’t want to arrive in Caylif smelling of sardines and cabbage.” Unlike Abeke and Rollan, Tasha had eventually begun sleeping in the captain’s quarters

belowdecks. For Abeke, it reminded her too much of Nisha, Arac, and all the other Greencloaks who had been lost to Zerif's parasites on Stetriol.

"I'd hoped that Lenori would send another message, or even Greenhaven," Abeke said. They had only received two missives since departing Stetriol—one telling them that Greenhaven had fallen to Zerif, and the second directing them to a small fishing village west of Caylif. They were to rendezvous with Dante, a former Greencloak.

"According to Essix, we should be arriving soon," Rollan said. "Let's hope this Dante knows where to find Cabaro."

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" Abeke asked. "Maybe we should go to Greenhaven anyway. Surely there's something we could do to help our friends."

"Believe me, if circumstances were different, I'd easily pick a fight with Zerif over Cabaro," Rollan replied. "But remember how tough he was in Amaya? Now think about how difficult it would be to face him with a castle full of Greencloaks and spirit animals on his side. We don't want to give him the opportunity to steal more Great Beasts."

Abeke nodded. "I suppose you're right." Rollan turned to walk away, but Abeke motioned for him to stop. "Something you just said—you expect a fight with Cabaro? We didn't have any resistance from Tellun or Ninani."

"Tellun and Ninani have always been on the Greencloaks' side," Rollan said. "Cabaro hates humans."

"Maybe he has no choice but to accept humans, now that he's bonded with one."

Rollan's hands tightened around his cloak. "Or maybe that'll give him reason to hate us more."



A few hours later, the *Tellun's Pride II* drew into a small natural bay. Abeke, Rollan, and Tasha worked together to lower the sails and drop the anchor in the calm, deep blue waters. They thought it would be safer to take a smaller skiff in than to try to navigate the large ship farther into the harbor.

They gathered on the deck and looked out at the small village. It was silent—Abeke couldn't even hear the calls of wild animals. A few withered and fragile piers jutted from the mainland out into the water. A lone man stood on one of the docks, but he was too far away for Abeke to determine much about him. All Abeke could tell was that he wasn't wearing a cloak.

"Is that the person we're looking for?" Tasha asked. "Do you want me to climb to the crow's nest to get a better look?"

"No need," Rollan said. A few seconds later, his eyes went glassy. Up above, Essix soared past, toward the man on the pier.

"Do you think I'll be able to do that with Ninani one day?" Tasha asked. "See through her eyes like Rollan does with Essix?"

It was when Tasha began asking questions that Abeke missed the adult Greencloaks the most. Tasha looked to Abeke and Rollan as if they were experts on all things related to spirit animals. The truth was, both she and Rollan still had much to learn about their own bonds. But Abeke also knew that Tasha needed to believe someone was in charge, even though Abeke wasn't exactly sure that she and Rollan really knew what they were doing.

"Each spirit animal brings different gifts, as I'm sure you've already discovered," Abeke finally said. "I'd bet that you move much faster with her helping you. Your reflexes are also sharper, correct?"

"Ninani makes me much more graceful—I'm all left feet without her."

"All left feet?" Abeke repeated.

"Just slang from back home," Tasha said. "It means that I'm clumsy." She pointed to her boots, which she'd found in an abandoned trunk belowdecks. "You know, like I have two left feet instead of a left and a right one."

Abeke grinned. "Ninani's grace will certainly help with that. And there could be even more gifts that you'll discover in time. The Greencloaks will help teach you."

If any Greencloaks remain, Abeke thought.

Rollan shook his head as his eyes returned to normal. He leaned against the rail and took in a few deep breaths. Even though he didn't

want to admit it to her, Abeke could tell that the loosening bonds between humans and their spirit animals were affecting Rollan, too. “That could be Dante,” he said after he caught his breath. “It’s hard to tell. I didn’t see any spirit animal beside him, but it could just be in passive state.”

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” Abeke said.

Rollan slowly climbed into the docking boat, then Tasha. Abeke started to climb in as well, until she noticed her spirit animal hanging back.

“Uraza,” Abeke called out. “Please.”

“You know, maybe it makes sense for someone to stay here and guard the ship,” Rollan said. “Tasha and I can check things out at the pier.”

Abeke shook her head. “Without knowing what lies ahead, we’re better off staying together.” She closed her eyes, cleared her mind, then called Uraza to her. A second later, the Great Beast disappeared with a hot flash onto a small black mark below her elbow.

The trip to the harbor took less time than Abeke would have liked. While Rollan and Tasha rowed, she held her bow low, the arrow already nocked. With everything else happening in Erdas, they couldn’t take any chances.

The man walked to the end of the pier as they approached. Rollan and Tasha stopped rowing. “Identify yourself,” Abeke called out. She raised her bow, just enough to make sure he saw the arrow.

The man was tall, with broad shoulders, tanned skin, and high cheekbones. His face was clean-shaven, and his long hair was pulled into a thick ponytail. Abeke couldn’t tell where he was from by looking at him, but she was sure that he wasn’t a native Niloan.

“I am Dante,” he said, offering a small bow. “At your service. And you are Abeke and Rollan. And your friend ... are you the one who called Ninani?”

“If you’re really Dante, you would be wearing your cloak.” Rollan placed his hand on the hilt of the knife tucked into his waistband. “Try again.”

“Ah, yes, you are most definitely Rollan. Lenori has spoken much of you.” He pulled a small, rolled note from his hand. “You probably have

no idea of how proud you made all of Amaya during the war. You and Essix are national heroes.”

As if on cue, Essix swooped down from the sky and landed on Dante’s shoulder. Dante stretched out his hand, offering up the note to the gyrfalcon. Essix gingerly picked up the parchment with her beak, then flew to Rollan.

Rollan unfurled the note and read it, while Essix rested on his shoulder. “It looks like Lenori’s handwriting,” he whispered. “And clearly Essix trusts him.”

Dante opened his backpack and pulled out a faded green cloak. “Permission to come aboard?”



There was one thing for certain—Dante knew his way around a ship. He worked twice as fast as Abeke, Rollan, and Tasha combined. And when Tasha knocked over a large barrel, almost smashing his foot, he didn’t yell at her. Instead, he calmly showed her a better knot to use to tie down the cargo.

After they had pulled out of the bay, they all met at the ship’s wheel. “We may be cutting it close, but I think we can make it to Caylif before dusk,” Dante said.

“And this is where we’ll find Cabaro?” Tasha asked.

Dante nodded. “Cabaro was summoned by a boy named Kirat. His father, Faisel, is one of the wealthiest merchants in Nilo. Some estimate that he controls a third of the trade routes between Northern Nilo and Zhong. Honestly, I’m surprised that word of Cabaro’s summoning hadn’t reached Stetriol. Faisel has been telling everyone about the lion and has even planned a feast in honor of Cabaro and his son.”

Abeke thought back to their time in Stetriol—how Zerif’s forces had arrived as word of Ninani’s appearance spread. If word of Cabaro had spread similarly ...

“We have to move quickly,” she said. “We must contact Faisel at once.”

“I’ve tried,” Dante said. “Once this latest crisis began, Lenori coaxed me out of retirement. I was on my way to Greenhaven when she sent

word asking me to stop here and warn Faisel.” He rubbed his hands together. “Faisel hasn’t been willing to meet with me. He feels that he has no need for our help.”

“Yeah, well, he hasn’t seen what Zerif can do,” Rollan said.

“And Zerif hasn’t seen Zourtzi,” Dante countered.

Tasha frowned. “What’s Zourtzi?”

Dante smiled. “You will see it soon enough for yourself. It’s just around the bend.”

Tasha turned to Dante. “And what’s your spirit animal?” she asked.

As Dante frowned, Tasha brought her hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry. Should I not have asked?”

“It’s okay,” Dante said. He raised his sleeve and rubbed a pale spot on his wrist. “Aputin was my spirit animal. The finest mountain goat ever seen.” He rolled his sleeve back down. “He was killed during the war. It was like losing an arm. No, it was worse.”

No one spoke for a few seconds. Finally, Tasha said, “I’m sorry.”

“Many of us paid a large price during the war.” He rearranged his cloak on his shoulders. “But whether I have Aputin by my side or not, I will always be a Greencloak.”

“What does it mean?” Abeke asked. “Aputin?”

“It’s a type of rock, isn’t it?” Rollan asked.

“Not just any rock,” Dante said. “It’s one of the hardest minerals found in Amaya. Very difficult to cut or shape.” Dante smiled. “It seemed like a fitting name for a spirit animal that liked to head-butt me when we disagreed.” Dante looked at the others. “I guess you all didn’t have to worry about naming your partners.”

Abeke rubbed the mark on her arm. While she was honored to have called forth Uraza, she sometimes wondered what she would have named her spirit animal if she had bonded with another creature instead of one of the Great Beasts. She knew that Tarik, their former guardian, had named his spirit animal Lumeo, which meant “light.” It fit the otter’s playful, clownish nature. And Hano, a boy from her village, had named his anteater Digger because of the way the animal burrowed into the ground with its long snout and sharp claws. Would Abeke have picked a

name based on Uraza's nature? Or would she have named the animal after her mother, like she had sometimes dreamed?

A few minutes later, a large stone fortress came into view. Abeke had never seen a structure so tall—it was three times the size of Greenhaven. Large bronze cannons stood at the top of every tower. Even from far away, Abeke could see the sentries at each of the battlements.

“That, my young friends, is Zourtzi. It has been in Faisel's family for generations. The rumor is that its walls have never been breached, even during both of the Devourer wars.” Dante pointed toward the castle. “Save for a small man-made channel, the island fortress is surrounded by a network of shallow, rocky reefs. It makes a water approach nearly impossible, and it also pushes most ships' cannons out of range.”

“What is it made of?” Tasha asked. “The walls look so ... smooth.”

“It's built from solid stone imported from Zhong,” Dante said. “Once the outer wall was completed, each brick was sanded down to make it flush with the mortar. There is no way any animal could scale that wall, much less a human.”

“Unnavigable water and unclimbable walls,” Rollan muttered. “I'm guessing this Faisel guy isn't too keen on people popping in to say hello.”

“I've tried to contact Faisel every way I know how. But perhaps he will listen to the Heroes of Erdas,” Dante said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Abeke saw Rollan frown. She knew how much he hated being called a hero. “Perhaps we could—what's that sound?”

They all looked around as a whistle grew louder. Abeke wasn't sure, but it seemed to be coming from above.

“Take cover!” Dante yelled. “We're under attack!”

Just then, a cannonball splashed into the water, drenching the deck with seawater.

Abeke scrambled to the bridge and jerked the wheel, steering the ship away from the fortress. “Everyone okay?” she asked.

Tasha looked even paler than usual as she huddled against the rail, but she nodded. “I'm fine,” she said, in rushed, ragged breaths. Her braid

had come undone when she'd ducked, causing her fine, blond hair to spill across her face.

Rollan pushed himself to his feet and winced as he rubbed his shoulder. "I thought you said that it was too far for cannons to fire?" he mumbled.

"Too far for a *ship's* cannons," Dante said. "Not Zourtzi's. The additional height of the fortress increases their cannons' range."

"So now what?" Rollan asked. "We're sitting ducks out here."

Abeke shook her head. "The cannonball landed too far away. I don't think they were actually trying to attack us."

"I agree," Dante said. He shielded his eyes from the sun and gazed at the fortress. "It was a warning shot."

Rollan snorted. "Message received, loud and clear."



The sun was just beginning to set as the *Tellun's Pride II* reached Caylif. Hints of orange, red, and yellow danced along the waterline, reminding Abeke yet again of the plains surrounding her village.

Abeke watched as Dante steered the large vessel into the bay. It was nothing like the fishing village where they had found him—or anywhere else she had been for that matter. Even as evening approached, the docks swarmed with deckhands and merchants. Dante had asked Abeke to drop all the sails except one, using it to slowly maneuver the ship through the docks. He motioned for her to drop the last sail as Rollan tossed a set of ropes to a group of men on the pier. They slowly winched the ship into place, then tied it off on a large wooden bollard.

"Okay, so I have to admit, he has his perks," Rollan said as Dante tossed the men on the pier a few coins. "I don't think we would have been able to get the ship into the dock without him."

"It *is* good to have someone else around," Abeke said. "Someone older."

"Yeah. It's like it doesn't feel so hard—so impossible—with Dante here. It's almost like ..." Rollan cleared his throat. "It's almost like it was when Tarik traveled with us."

Abeke let the silence linger between them. Much time had passed since their guardian had fallen in battle, but for Rollan it was a wound that still ran deep.

“Are we going into town?” Tasha asked as she exited the ship’s galley. It had been her turn to prepare the meal—not that there was much variety to choose from. They had eaten sardines and pickled cabbage every day since escaping from Stetriol. It was the only food remaining on the ship.

“It would be best to wait until tomorrow,” Dante answered as he joined them. “The market will be closing soon. And the man we need to see probably isn’t there at this hour, anyway.” Then Dante sniffed the air. “Are those pickled cabbages?”

Tasha nodded. “It’s all we have left. That, and sardines.”

“And how are you preparing them?” he asked, drawing in another deep breath. “Are you *boiling* them?”

“How else are you supposed to cook them?” Tasha asked.

Dante turned to Rollan for help. “Seriously, is that how you all prepare your food?”

Rollan shrugged. “I just eat them raw. Saves time.”

“Tasha, go through my bag and pull out the small package of red and black seasoning.” Dante shook his head and rolled up his sleeves. “Boiled cabbage. What are you all, savages?”

Tasha retrieved the spices, then Dante entered the galley.

When he returned an hour later, he carried a large, heaping plate of food. “I call it Dante’s Stir-Fried Cabbage Surprise.” He handed the plate to Rollan. “Just a little something I picked up from a cook while I was stationed at the Mire. Enjoy.”

“You were at the Mire? In Zhong?” Abeke asked. She had overheard others speaking of the Mire, a Greencloak prison deep in the jungle in Southern Zhong. It was reserved for the most dangerous criminals.

“Yeah. I served as a guard there. Twice.” A small smile spread across Dante’s lips as he cracked his knuckles. “Aputin and I were very good at ... keeping prisoners in line.”

Abeke shuddered as she took the plate from Rollan. As nice as Dante was, there was something dark just below the surface. While Tarik had

often wanted to avoid conflict, she got the sense that Dante enjoyed battle.

Tasha scooped some of the food into a bowl next. “Where are the sardines?” she asked.

“They’re in there,” Dante said. “I just chopped them up. They’re less salty that way.”

Rollan had already shoveled three spoonfuls of food into his mouth. “This is amazing!”

“I wish I could take credit, but it’s all in the spices,” Dante said.

“And do you always carry a package of spices with you?” Abeke asked. “Did you pick that up while in the Mire as well?”

Dante shook his head. “Those aren’t Zhongese spices. They’re native to my home in Amaya. Sanabajari.”

Rollan glanced at Abeke. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“You may know it by a different name,” Dante said, smiling. “Boulder City.”

Rollan’s eyes lit up. “Do you know Monte? Is he still running his trading post?”

Abeke noticed the confusion on Tasha’s face. “Monte is an old friend,” Abeke said. “We met him during one of our first battles.” Abeke decided not to tell Tasha that she had actually been fighting on the enemies’ side back then. But at the time, Abeke hadn’t known that Shane and Zerif were evil. She hadn’t discovered that until Zerif plunged his knife into a defenseless Greencloak’s back.

“No, Monte’s given up the trading post,” Dante said. “I was tending it for him, until Lenori convinced me to come back.” Dante spooned some food into his mouth. “I had been looking forward to seeing Monte again. It’s been too long. His regulars are starting to miss him.”

“Where is he now?” Tasha asked. “Off on another mission?”

Dante’s face soured. “No. He was in Greenhaven, along with the others.”

Tasha took a deep breath. “I’m sorry—”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” Dante said. “There is never any harm in asking a question. You just have to be prepared to hear the answer.”

Silence followed, while Tasha took this in. Her eyes fell to her hands. Finally, she rose from the deck. “In that case, I think I’ve asked enough questions for tonight,” she said with a weak smile. “I’ll see you all tomorrow morning.”

Abeke watched her disappear belowdecks. “She is so green. I hope she’s ready for what lies ahead.”

“Were any of us really ready when we first received the call? When we first fastened the cloak around our shoulders?” Dante scooped more food into his bowl. “If she’s going to fight among the Greencloaks, she must learn that this life isn’t for the faint of heart. And believe me, it’s best for her to learn this sooner rather than later.”



THE MARKET

ROLLAN WALKED A FEW STEPS AHEAD OF DANTE, ABEKE, and Tasha as they neared the large market in the center of town. He hadn't expected to feel so apprehensive. He had grown up in a large city just like Caylif—out of all of them, he should have felt the most at ease. Yet even as the familiar sounds of the market began to fill his ears—women selling handmade pots, boys hawking fresh fruit, and men counting gold coins—Rollan still felt on edge.

He looked overhead as Essix soared past. She had come to the ship as soon as they docked yesterday evening and had remained through the entire night. He was glad to have her nearby. Unlike the others, the gyrfalcon understood exactly what lay ahead.

Abeke hadn't been with him and Conor when they had first faced Cabaro, here in Nilo. The Great Beast hadn't fought them initially, instead allowing his lionesses to do his dirty work. When Cabaro finally struck, he was ferocious, almost crushing Briggan during the fight. But when the Conquerors arrived to take his talisman, Cabaro did what he did best. He retreated.

It was during his escape that Cabaro had almost trampled Rollan. Rollan could still remember Cabaro's foot coming toward him—his claws were as large as Rollan's body. The Great Lion would have crushed him if Tarik hadn't pulled him out of the way.

Tarik ...

“What's wrong, Rollan?” Abeke asked.

Rollan blinked. He hadn't even heard Abeke creep up behind him. "What makes you think something's wrong?" he asked.

"You haven't told a joke since we left the ship," she replied. "And you hardly ate your breakfast."

"First of all, I wouldn't call leftover cabbage a proper breakfast," he said. "And don't worry about the jokes. I'm saving them all up for Faisel. Maybe a little humor and charm is all we need to convince him to let us steal his prized son away."

"I wouldn't call him prized," Abeke said. "According to Dante, Faisel and his son have a difficult relationship." She sighed. "Perhaps that's one thing he and I will have in common." Then she patted Rollan's shoulder. "I know you're worried about Cabaro joining us because we're humans. But surely even he will understand the importance of what we're trying to do. His fate is tied to Erdas, just as ours is."

Rollan shrugged. He wouldn't admit it to Abeke—he could hardly admit it to himself—but that wasn't the only reason he was feeling squeamish. The fact that they were here to rescue the Great Lion was drumming up some not-so-great memories.

Rollan touched his cloak. *Tarik's* cloak. Abeke and Faisel's son had difficult relationships with their fathers, but at least they *had* fathers. Tarik was the closest person to a father he'd ever had. And thanks to the cowardly Cabaro—

No. Rollan couldn't let himself think about Tarik now. Too much was at stake. He had to remain sharp. Focused. Tarik would have told him just as much if he had been there.

Rollan paused at the edge of the market and waited for Dante and Tasha to catch up. The market looked even larger than the main market in his hometown of Concorba. Large multicolored tents billowed in the breeze, and white smoke from the cooking pits filled the air. People pushed and jostled each other as they made their way from merchant to merchant. He could hear at least three different languages, if not more.

He grinned. This was a thief's paradise.

Not that he stole things anymore, but a boy could dream.

Finally, Dante and Tasha joined them. Tasha was the slowest of the group, but Rollan hadn't once heard Dante chastise her for it. She was

carrying a wooden baton that she had found in the armory, but the weapon looked out of place in her hands.

“So now what?” Rollan asked. “Should we just walk around until we find his shop?”

“And how long will that take?” Abeke asked. “My entire village could fit inside this market.”

Rollan spotted a small kid huddled in the corner, chewing on a thick slice of bread. The boy’s clothes were much too big for him, and his face was streaked with red dirt. “Hey, kid,” he called. Once the boy looked up, Rollan pulled a small coin from his pocket. The boy perked up and ran over to them.

Rollan dropped the coin into the boy’s hand. “We’re looking for a shop belonging to a merchant named Faisel.”

After staring at the coin for a few seconds, the boy looked at Rollan. “Which shop? Faisel owns a silk shop, a carpet store, a cart for selling spices, a—”

“What about Otto?” Dante asked. “The large, round man with a gray beard. Where can we find him?”

“Hold on. Let me check.” The boy ran to a group of kids huddled around a well. After speaking in whispered tones, he returned to Rollan. “We think he’s at the silk shop today.” The boy pocketed the coin and pointed. “It’s on the eastern side of the market.”

Rollan flashed another coin. “How about you lead us there, and you can add this to your collection?”

The boy nodded, and the others fell into step behind him.

“Who is Otto?” Tasha asked.

“He’s one of Faisel’s business partners,” Dante said. “If we impress him enough—and pay him enough—he should be able to grant us an audience with Faisel. But I should warn you, Otto and I have spoken of this before. It didn’t end well—for him.”

As the group made their way through the market, Rollan noticed a lot of people were staring at them. “Should we take off our cloaks?” he whispered. “We’re drawing a lot of attention to ourselves.”

“No, that’s exactly what we want,” Dante said. “The more important we seem, the more we will impress Otto.” He glanced at Rollan. “When

the time comes, we will need Essix.”

Rollan nodded. “She’ll be there.”

At least Rollan hoped she’d be there. He and Essix had always been comfortable working independently of each other, going long stretches of time without direct contact, but even *they* weren’t immune to the effects of the bond loosening. It took so much effort for Rollan to see through her eyes, and he could only do it in spurts. Almost every time afterward, he felt sick to his stomach, as if he’d drunk a bowl of spoiled milk.

Even now, the bond between them was so faint. He knew that Essix was somewhere above, but that was all he knew. She could have been ten paces away or a hundred. Or a thousand. He could no longer tell the difference.

They had to stop Zerif and fix the Evertree. Rollan had already lost so many others. He couldn’t lose Essix, too.

Rollan flipped the coin to the boy when they reached the shop. “Be sure to share that with your friends,” Rollan said. He hoped those coins would buy a few loaves of bread and blocks of cheese.

The silk shop, with its gold trim and large, flowing flags, was clearly designed to draw attention to itself. Rollan wouldn’t have dared to even approach a store like this when he was living on the street. He would have been thrown in jail or sent to an orphanage for just *thinking* about entering such a fine shop.

And even though he could now afford to shop here, he still didn’t feel as if he belonged. Maybe he never would.

Dante entered the shop first, ringing a small bell hanging in the doorway. Rollan was the last to enter. As he shut the door behind him, the noises and smells of the market faded away.

“Beautiful,” Tasha said as she ran her hands along a row of colored silk ribbons.

Rollan picked up a dark red silk scarf. Something about it reminded him of Meilin. He hoped she was safe, wherever she was. Lenori hadn’t sent any additional word of her or Conor. Rollan had been telling himself that no news was good news.

“Can I help you?” a young man asked, rushing up to the group. His black hair was slicked back, and his skin looked much too oily, considering the dry atmosphere. “Ah, Greencloaks,” he said. “What can I do for such fine warriors? I’d be happy to show you our new shipment of silks and linens. Or maybe our handmade tunics.”

Dante waved him off. “We’re here to see Otto.”

The young man faltered. “Mzee Otto is extremely busy. Are you sure there’s not something I could help you with?”

Dante placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

The young man nodded, then disappeared in the rear of the store. Abeke shook her head. “Was there not another way? I don’t like intimidating people with violence.”

“Says the girl who met me with a bow in her hand,” Dante replied.

A few minutes later, a large, round man approached the group. Three men followed him, each dressed in black. A small snake had curled itself around one of the men’s shoulders. A monkey hung around the neck of the other. The third didn’t have a spirit animal in sight, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t one of the Marked.

“Dante, you’ve returned,” the man said. “And you’ve brought reinforcements.” He nodded toward the men behind him. “So did I.”

Dante opened his hands, signaling for peace. “Otto, I know our last meeting didn’t end on the best terms, but I wanted to give you another chance to arrange an audience with Faisel. I assure you, he would look at you most favorably.”

“Faisel has no need for a has-been Greencloak and a bunch of kids.”

If Dante was offended, he didn’t show it. “These are not any ordinary children, Otto.” He nodded toward Abeke. “If you don’t mind ...”

Abeke closed her eyes, scrunched her face, and finally Uraza appeared with a flash of light. Then Ninani.

Rollan cleared his throat. *Anytime, Essix.*

Finally, there was a shriek from an open window. Essix looked at Rollan, as if she were saying, *Told you I’d be here.*

“Don’t you think it would be fitting for Cabaro to be reunited with the other Great Beasts?” Dante offered.

“They don’t look very great to me,” Otto said.

Rollan crossed his arms. “Bet you wouldn’t say something like that to Cabaro.”

Otto scowled at Rollan. “Boy, don’t forget whose shop you’re in!”

“Faisel’s shop. Not yours,” Dante said. “Exclude me if you must—but let my young friends enter Zourtzi and pay their respects to Faisel, Kirat, and Cabaro.”

Rollan glanced at Abeke and Uraza out of the corner of his eye. They both looked restless. He pulled the bag of coins from his pocket. It was the last of their money, but getting them into Zourtzi would be worth the cost. “Listen to Dante. You could also profit greatly.”

“How much is in that bag, boy?”

Rollan could hear the greed seeping from Otto’s voice. “Take us to Faisel, and you can find out for yourself,” Rollan replied.

“Do you think I need your coins?” Then Otto smirked. “Actually, I *will* take the money. Your presence alone has probably cost me an hour’s worth of sales. Guards.”

Dante drew his sword as the guard with the snake advanced. Dante’s straight blade looked out of place against the curved swords of northern Nilo. “Otto, we do not want to fight,” he said. “But if we can’t pay you enough to take us to Faisel, perhaps we can persuade you in another way.”

Rollan pulled out his dagger. “Tasha, get behind me,” he whispered.

Tasha fiercely shook her head as she tightened her grip on her baton. “If you fight, then I will fight.”

Great, Rollan thought. That sounded like something Meilin would say. Unfortunately, he knew Tasha didn’t have the skills to back up her words.

Abeke had already pulled an arrow from her quiver, though she’d yet to draw her bow. “You all have spirit animals,” she said to the men. “You’ve felt your bonds straining over the past few days, yes? Something is happening to the connection between humans and spirit animals. That’s why we *must* find Cabaro. We need his help if we’re going to stop this evil from destroying the world.”

While two of the guards paused at this, the one with the snake charged forward. Dante blocked him, then kicked him in the chest. The man flew backward onto Otto. Even without the help of his spirit animal, Dante was still a gifted fighter.

“Watch out for the snake!” Abeke yelled. “It’s on your arm.”

Dante yelped as the snake’s fangs pierced his sleeve. He shook it off, then kicked the snake across the room, where it disappeared into a pile of silk sheets.

“Dante, are you all right?” Rollan yelled, his voice almost in a scream. As Dante inspected his arm, Rollan replayed Tarik being struck by Gerathon the Serpent.

“Its fangs barely grazed my arm. I’ll be fine,” Dante said as he backed up beside Abeke. The two remaining guards were slowly approaching. The last guard had called his spirit animal, a lynx, which was already lunging at Uraza. “Look alive, Greencloaks!” Dante yelled.

Rollan didn’t have much time to watch Dante and Abeke, as the man with the monkey had almost reached him and Tasha. The guard pulled an ax from his side and swung. Rollan ducked, easily dodging the ax’s blade, then swiped his knife at the guard’s stomach. Rollan missed, catching only the fabric of the guard’s shirt. Before he could swing again, the guard’s monkey leaped onto his face, shrieking and clawing with its hands.

Rollan dropped his dagger and tried to pry the animal off before it scratched his eyes out. Unable to remove it, he fell to the floor and began to roll around.

“Essix!” Rollan yelled.

Rollan sensed Essix taking flight. A few seconds later, the gyrfalcon had pulled the monkey from his neck and face. Then Essix flew off out the window with the monkey still in her talons.

“Bhouhan!” the man yelled as Essix and the monkey disappeared. Then the guard turned back to Tasha and Rollan with renewed determination in his eyes. Seeing Rollan still on the ground, he raised his ax high above his head. He quickly brought it down—and was blocked by Tasha’s baton. Spinning in place, she forced the attacker back and

placed herself in front of Rollan. “Are you okay?” she asked over her shoulder.

“I’m good. Thanks!” As Rollan got to his feet, he saw Ninani standing in the corner, her white wings splayed open. She must have been augmenting Tasha’s grace. There was no way that Tasha could fight the guard on her own.

Rollan picked up his dagger. His skin burned where the monkey had scratched him. “Ready?” he called. “Together!”

He and Tasha ran toward the man at the same time. The guard swung again, but Tasha easily blocked his attack, allowing Rollan to bury his knife into the man’s shoulder. The man screamed in pain and dropped his ax. He looked at the blood pouring from the wound and quickly retreated.

Rollan turned toward Abeke and was happy to see that she was holding the other guards at bay with her bow and arrow. One of their attackers had an arrow in his leg, and the other held his shoulder as if it were broken.

“Is everyone all right?” Abeke asked, not taking her eyes off the guards.

“Nothing a cold compress and bandage can’t fix,” Rollan said, wiping the blood away from his face. “Tasha?”

The girl shook her head as she stared at the end of the baton. There were nicks in the wood where it had blocked the ax blade. “I can’t believe I just did all of that. I’ve never even used a weapon like this until today.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re a quick study,” Rollan said. “We should also thank Ninani. I’m sure she had a lot to do with your newfound abilities.”

Ninani waddled over to Tasha and rubbed the girl’s leg with the crown of her head. “Will I ever get used to it? All this fighting?”

Rollan sighed. “Yes. But I suppose that isn’t a good thing.”

Abeke motioned for Rollan to join her. “I’ll talk to Tasha and make sure she’s okay,” Abeke whispered to him. “Maybe you should check on Dante.”

Rollan turned to see Dante standing over Otto, his sword at the large man’s chin.

“Get up,” Dante demanded.

“You idiot, you sliced my leg!” Otto wailed from his fetal position on the floor.

“At least I didn’t break it.” Dante poked Otto with his sword. “Now get up. You’re taking us to see Faisel, even if I have to carry you there.”

As Otto hobbled to his feet, Rollan heard a commotion outside the building. Suddenly, more guards burst through the back entrance, led by the young salesman from earlier. There were at least six men, with more pouring in. They started running toward them but were slowed down by the maze of silk racks.

“Head out the front!” Rollan yelled to Tasha and Abeke. He turned to Dante. “We have to go,” he said. “And you have to leave Otto. He’ll slow us down.”

Dante sneered at Otto but turned and followed Rollan. Outside, two more guards were lying on their backs, moaning in pain. A third was pressed underneath Uraza’s paw. Rollan glanced at Tasha, whose fingers were still tight around her baton. “Remind me never to get in a fight with you.”

“So now what?” Tasha asked.

The yelling in the shop grew louder. “We run,” Rollan said, taking off. He sped into a nearby alley, then slowed to make sure everyone had followed. Dante was holding his arm as he ran. The Greencloak had said that the snake had barely grazed his arm, that the injury wasn’t that bad. But what if he was wrong?

Rollan continued down the alley, sprinting between merchants, shoppers, and carts. He passed the last large group of people, then slid to a halt. Now that the path was clear, he could see the large beige brick wall stretching before him. Even with the help of their spirit animal partners, Rollan didn’t think they would be able to scale the wall. Certainly not before the guards reached them.

Abeke came to a stop beside Rollan. “Now what?” she asked. “Maybe we could hide in one of the carts.”

“Over here!”

Rollan turned around and spotted their young guide from earlier. He was tucked behind two large potted plants. “Follow me!” the boy yelled,

before disappearing behind the thick green leaves.

“Can we trust him?” Dante asked.

“I don’t believe we have a choice.” Abeke released an arrow as one of the guards entered the alley, then called Uraza into her dormant state. Rollan assumed that Tasha had done the same for Ninani, because the swan was nowhere in sight.

They pushed their way through the plants, revealing an even smaller alleyway between a high stone wall and a row of rickety wooden buildings. It was tight, especially for Dante and his broad shoulders, but they quickly inched their way through.

“We should have stayed and fought,” Dante said. “We’re Greencloaks.”

“Us and what army?” Rollan quipped. “Just keep pushing ahead.”

Rollan heard the guards behind him. They had reached the alleyway. He only hoped that they didn’t have arrows.

“You stay here,” one of the guards yelled. “I’ll circle around and cut them off.”

Rollan tried to judge how much farther they had until they reached the other side. They were moving, but not fast enough. *Now would be a really good time for one of those Redcloak guys to show up*, he thought.

Dante must have realized how slowly they were moving as well. “We’ll never make it to the other side in time!”

“We’re not going to the other side,” their guide replied as he climbed—*into the wall?* Rollan reached the spot where the boy had disappeared. There was a large, jagged hole in the wall, opening up to a weathered rock ledge overlooking the entire city. In the valley below, hundreds of small huts and mud-brick shacks lined weaving streets. Then a wide river cut through the city, dividing it. Large white limestone homes sat on the opposite side of the river. Some houses looked big enough to comfortably hold every Greencloak in Greenhaven. Beyond those homes was the first in a series of mountains, their peaks hazy in the sun’s orange glow. It was all breathtaking, for the few seconds that Rollan had to enjoy it.

“This way,” the boy called as he inched along the wall. “But watch your step.”

Rollan's feet barely fit on the ledge. He slowly followed the boy and tried not to look down.

"We're almost there," the boy said. "There's a sinkhole up ahead. It drops down into a natural well. The water should be deep enough for you to fall through without breaking your legs—I think."

"Could you try to be a little more positive?" Rollan asked.

The boy smiled, then jumped into the hole.

Rollan took a deep breath, squeezed his eyes shut, and leaped after the boy.

At first, there was nothing. And then, after an eternity, Rollan slammed into the water below, his breath knocked out of him. He surfaced, then immediately started swimming. A few seconds later, Abeke splashed into the water, followed by Tasha and Dante.

They pulled themselves onto a small sandstone ledge. The boy led them through a series of interconnected caverns. The stone walls varied in color from bloodred to stark white. Stalactites hung above them like chandeliers in a fancy ballroom. Rollan placed his hand on the wall to one of the caves. It was cooler than he expected.

"Many years ago, a tributary of the Nilo River flowed through here," their guide said, pointing to what looked like a dried riverbed. "Now all that remains are these hollowed-out sandstone caves." He eventually stopped upon reaching a long, jagged crack in the rock wall. He pushed through with Rollan close behind. It was another cave almost totally concealed from view.

The boy led them to a large outcropping of boulders at the back of the hidden cave. "I doubt they'll come this far," he said. "But we'd better hide, just to be sure."

They remained quiet for a while, waiting for any guards to show up.

"I think we're safe," the boy said after some time had passed. "Though we may want to stay here until nightfall."

"We'll have to find somewhere else to hide for the night," Abeke said. "Otto is sure to have more guards waiting for us at the harbor."

"I think we have worse problems," Tasha said. "Something's wrong with Dante."

Dante lay slumped over behind a rock. He had already rolled up his sleeve and had tied a cloth around his bicep. There were two small puncture marks below his elbow. Around the bite, his brown skin had turned red and swollen.

“Dante?” Rollan whispered as he inspected his arm. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I really thought it was just a scratch,” he mumbled. “Didn’t realize it was swelling until we were running through the alley.”

Abeke turned to the boy. “What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Madeo,” he said.

“Our friend needs help,” she said. “Is there someone in town who can attend to his wound?”

Madeo nodded. “There’s a woman who lives near the market. Sayyidah Iolya. She will help, but it will come at a price.”

Rollan tightened the cloth tie around Dante’s arm. “Fine. We’ll pay whatever is required. Just take us there.” Rollan helped Dante to his feet. “And hurry,” he added, as images of Tarik flashed through his mind. “We don’t have much time.”



THE SULFUR SEA

MEILIN WOKE UP TO FIND HER FACE PRESSED AGAINST black sand. She sat up, brushed the grit from her cheeks, and let her eyes adjust to the endless darkness. Slowly, she made out the lapping sea ahead of them. It seemed to stretch out forever.

Conor was still asleep. Quietly, she pulled back the cloak that he had been using as a cover. The parasite was at the base of his neck. It would make it to his forehead soon. Their only chance to save him was to find and destroy the Wurm. Which, without Xanthe as their guide, would be much more difficult.

Meilin wished she could go back in time and change how she had treated Xanthe. She knew she had been cruel and cold to the girl, but Meilin didn't like being led around. It wasn't something she was accustomed to. How could she assess the correct path and strategy for her team when she didn't even know which way was north or south? She had lashed out at Xanthe, especially when Xanthe tried to explain how she was navigating the many underground tunnels. It wasn't like Xanthe had memorized a map. She was staking their very lives on her intuition—her hocus-pocus-based navigation.

Meilin looked at the design on the back of her hand. Who was she to question Xanthe's spiritual connection to Sadre? She and Jhi were more than enough evidence that the world above was just as magical. Some things were not meant to be explained. They just were.

Meilin began packing up their meager supplies. She would have traded their entire collection of rockweed for one of Rollan's silly jokes

right now. His smiling face was the one she always searched for when things were at their worst. But thanks to Kovo, she was stuck underground while Rollan was up above. She wondered which other Great Beasts had returned. Hopefully, he and Abeke had been more successful than she and Conor.

Takoda joined her at their campsite, dragging the large paddle behind him. “Are you rested enough?” Takoda asked.

“No. Not that it matters.” She reached out her hand. “So you finished the paddle?”

Nodding, he hoisted it up and handed it to her. As she took it, Meilin noticed the redness of his palms, the peeling of his skin. She bounced the paddle in her hands, testing its weight. It was still plenty solid, but not too heavy for Kovo, and the rounded handle would be easy for him to grip. Likewise, she figured that the large, flat end of the paddle would be adequate enough to propel them through the water. She would have preferred a sail to navigate the underground winds, but that would have been difficult to make in such limited time, with such threadbare supplies.

“It looks good,” she said, handing it back. Then, after a moment, she added, “Thank you.”

Takoda looked at the gourd. “I guess we should start packing up the boat.”

She heard the sadness in his voice. “Do you want eat first, and then go? We can take a few more minutes—”

“No,” he replied. “It would better if we ate while we traveled. No point in wasting any more time.”

He walked off toward the boat. Meilin let him go. Takoda was struggling enough with Xanthe’s disappearance as it was, and Meilin didn’t think she had the words to comfort him.

But she knew who *did*.

She touched the tattoo on the back of her hand, and Jhi appeared in the sand beside her. “I’m going to wake Conor,” she told the panda. “Is there anything you can do to help Takoda?”

After Jhi left, Meilin knelt beside Conor and touched his arm. Slowly, his eyes batted open. “Huh ... Meilin?” He sat up and yawned. “How

long was I asleep?”

“Not very long,” Meilin said. She didn’t know exactly how long he had been asleep—this eternal darkness made tracking time nearly impossible—but she knew he’d slept longer than usual. “Are you ready?” she asked him.

He nodded as he scratched behind Briggan’s ears. “Do you think I’ll have to put Briggan in his dormant state?”

Meilin looked at the sea. It seemed fairly smooth for now, but she had no idea what awaited them farther in. “I’ll leave that to you and Briggan to decide,” she said. “There should be enough room in the boat for him, if that’s what you want.”

“I just ... I don’t know if I can trust myself. Especially if I have to lead us to the Wyrms. I don’t know what that will do to the parasite.” He shrugged. “And don’t try to argue with me. It’s our best plan.”

Meilin remained still. Conor had first mentioned that he could sense the Wyrms when they were cleaning the gourd. She hadn’t wanted to use his connection to lead them to it, but without Xanthe, she didn’t see any other option. “That’s a lot to ask of you,” she finally said, her words measured.

“But you would do the same,” he said, cutting into her with his clear blue eyes. He had changed so much, from the ruddy-faced shepherd from Eura to one of the Heroes of Erdas. He was slimmer. Taller. Less naive and more ingrained in this new life of battles, danger, and quests.

She desperately missed the old Conor.

“You will be okay,” she said. “I believe in you. Remember how I fought Gerathon’s Bile? You can do the same. Use the Wyrms, but don’t let it control you.”

“Okay,” Conor said. “But I need you to promise me something.”

Meilin already knew where this was going. “No, Conor.”

He moved so he was sitting right in front of her. “If the time comes ... *when* the times comes that the parasite takes over my body, you have to stop me. I can’t become one of them. One of the Many.”

Meilin glanced at her hands. She didn’t want to picture using them to fight Conor. But she also didn’t want to see him turn into one of the

Wyrms' mindless minions. "We'll ... figure something out," Meilin stammered. "We'll bring ropes. We ... we can tie you up."

"And if that doesn't work?"

Meilin finally looked back up and slowly nodded. "Then I'll stop you," she promised. "One way or another."

She rose then, and joined Takoda and Jhi at the boat. Takoda seemed much more relaxed than before. Meilin knew that Jhi must have used her powers to soothe him. Meilin herself wouldn't have made it through some of her darker days without the Great Beast.

As Jhi walked toward Meilin, she kept stopping to shake excess sand from her black-and-white fur. After a few feeble attempts, Jhi plopped down on her rear and waited for Meilin to come to her.

"Lazy panda," Meilin said with a grin. "I know you don't like the beach, but be careful what you wish for." She rubbed the panda's paws, trying to brush off as much sand as she could, then pulled her to passive state. She would keep Jhi away for as long as possible, but she'd eventually have to come out to care for Conor.

Takoda and Meilin didn't speak as they began loading their equipment into the gourd. Conor joined them a few moments later, lugging some of the supplies from their campsite. Kovo sat a few feet away, his arms defiantly crossed, but Meilin didn't want to ask him for help. The ape would be doing most of the rowing anyway.

She picked up her quarterstaff and placed it in the boat. It felt funny in her hands—it was too short and didn't have the proper weight—but she refused to leave it behind. It was one of the few weapons that remained. They had lost almost everything when fleeing Phos Astos, and the rest while sprinting across the burning Arachane Fields.

Once all the supplies were loaded, Takoda called for Kovo. The Great Beast huffed and grunted, but helped them to push the boat into the water.

"Is he upset about rowing?" Conor asked once the boat bobbed in the sea.

"No," Takoda replied. "He just doesn't like the water." Then he nodded at Briggan, who was timidly pawing at the wet beach. "Perhaps he'd be more comfortable in passive state?"

“Conor and Briggan are fine,” Meilin snapped. She immediately regretted her tone, but at the same time, she didn’t want Takoda to make Conor feel self-conscious, even unintentionally. Water splashed onto her boots and legs as she made her way to the boat. She climbed in. “Let’s go.”

Conor and Briggan followed, then Takoda. Finally, Kovo climbed into the boat. The gourd sank with the addition of each passenger, but remained above water. Kovo positioned himself at the rear of the boat. He jammed the end of the paddle through the shallow water to the sandy bottom of the sea and pushed them away from the beach.

“So what’s the plan?” Takoda asked. “There’s a small current. We can let that carry us for a while. That way, Kovo won’t tire himself out.”

“Well, let’s see if that’s even the correct way,” Meilin asked. “Conor?”

The boy looked paler than usual as he nodded. With one hand on Briggan, he closed his eyes. His breath started slowly at first, then increased at an alarming rate. Sweat poured down his face, and his body began to shake. The parasite at the base of his neck seemed to tremble as well. Meilin wasn’t sure, but it almost looked as if the black mark was moving....

“Conor, snap out of it!” she yelled as the parasite pulsed and wriggled a little higher. She couldn’t let him do this. “Conor!”

“To the left!” he shouted, his eyes flashing open. He pointed a shaky hand toward an invisible point on the water’s horizon. “There. That’s where we want to go.”

Meilin positioned herself beside Conor. “Are you okay?” After he nodded, she asked, “What did you see?”

“Not see,” he finally said. “Feel.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I felt evil.”



Meilin had no idea how long it would take to reach the base of the Evertree. They had been in the boat for hours and didn’t seem any closer to finding it than when they departed. For the most part, they traveled

with the current, though Kovo still had to use the paddle when the current shifted and pulled them in different directions.

She had finally ordered everyone to rest. Conor didn't waste any time, falling asleep as soon as he lay down. Takoda was more reluctant, but eventually he closed his eyes. Just before falling asleep, he suggested that she rest as well—that Kovo could take the first watch.

No way, Meilin thought. For all she knew, Kovo would capsize the boat and try to drown them all before continuing on to defeat—or maybe even partner with—the Wyrms himself. Or perhaps he would cast Conor overboard. Kovo hadn't bothered to hide his feelings about the boy. As soon as Conor fell asleep, Kovo and Takoda began signing passionately, with the ape repeatedly flipping his hands over, and then pointing to Conor. Each time, Takoda would pinch two fingers and his thumb together, shake his head, and reply with a resounding *No*.

Things looked bleak, but as long as Conor was fighting the effects of the parasite, she wouldn't abandon him.

But what would happen if he finally succumbed?

Meilin knew what it was like to not be in control of her own actions, to fight against another will for control of her body. During her Nectar Ceremony—when she summoned Jhi as her spirit animal—her father had secretly given her a concoction called the Bile. It was supposed to ensure that she would summon an animal. Instead, it made her a slave to Gerathon the Serpent, forcing her to do the evil Great Beast's bidding.

Even now, Meilin still remembered the look on Abeke's and Rollan's faces as Gerathon forced her to attack them. Meilin could hear the sound of her staff crashing down on Abeke's head, right before she captured her and delivered her to the Conquerors like a good little mindless soldier.

Meilin had been lucky—she had been able to avoid seriously hurting her friends, and thanks to Tellun, she had finally become free of the Bile. But could Conor hope for the same? And if Conor really *did* attack her or Takoda, would she be willing to do what was necessary to stop him?

She wondered if she should release Jhi. She could use the panda's comfort, and Conor could use her healing abilities. *I'll release her once Conor wakes*, she told herself. *I will not lose him without a fight.*

Meilin pulled her cloak around her arms and repositioned herself in the boat. Across from her, Kovo looked out at the sea. She followed his gaze.

Perhaps he saw something beyond the choppy yellow waves. Meilin searched as well. The water seemed to be breaking against something. Land? A reef? Or a ship? Yes, a ship! The *Tellun's Pride* cut through the mustard-colored water. Rollan stood on the bow of the ship, his worn green cloak rustling in the breeze. He was smiling and waving, and then he was frowning and shouting, although he was too far away for Meilin to hear him. She leaned closer, and closer, and—

She jerked up. There was no ship, and no Rollan. She had fallen asleep! Across from her, Kovo stared at her, smiling. *Weakling*, his eyes seemed to be saying.

Meilin sat up, forcing herself into a less comfortable position.

More hours passed. Meilin felt herself drifting off a few times, but was always able to snap awake before she fully embraced sleep. She glanced at Kovo. He sat perfectly still, with the large paddle in his lap. His eyes were closed, and his nostrils slowly brought air in and pushed it out. The mighty Kovo had fallen asleep. *Ha!* Who was the weakling now?

She was just about to wake up the others when she saw a luminous orb glowing in the distance. It almost looked like a smaller version of the sun, or perhaps a full moon, but they were underground. That was impossible. She pinched herself, just to make sure that she wasn't asleep.

As they approached the orb, Meilin realized that it seemed to be hovering in the air. She thought about the glowing spheres that Takoda had found. They weren't nearly as bright as this one. If she could grab it, they wouldn't have to sit in this eternal darkness.

Meilin stood up slowly, so that she wouldn't rock the boat. The orb was almost within reach. She raised herself on her tiptoes, stretched her arms out, and grabbed it with both hands. It was warm and sticky, but at least the tacky gunk covering it made it easier to hold.

But it wasn't until she grabbed it that she realized the orb wasn't actually floating. It was hanging from something. She could now clearly see what looked like a dark gray, sinewy tree branch attached to it. The

branch arched high, then disappeared into the water. What type of tree was this?

She tugged hard on the orb, hoping that she could pull it from the branch. Suddenly, the water around them churned, and the orb began to pull away. Meilin tried to drop it, but it was stuck to her! The tacky substance on the orb's surface had glued her hands to it.

The vine jerked violently away from the boat. Meilin stumbled forward. Her foot caught on the edge of the gourd, and she felt herself falling overboard. She squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself for the impact against the water—but something large and meaty grabbed her waist, stopping her from falling over.

Kovo!

He snarled at her as he pulled her back into the boat. Immediately, the orb began jerking away again, causing Meilin's arms to yank forward. Kovo grabbed the branch, or whatever it was, and tore it away from the orb.

With the tension from the branch immediately released, Meilin fell backward onto her rear, the orb still in her hands. Takoda was awake by now, and Conor was trying to untangle himself from his cloak.

"What's going on?" Takoda yelled.

"I don't know," Meilin said, scrambling back to her feet. "I saw this orb and I grabbed it, thinking we could use the light. But now it's stuck to my hands."

Conor pointed toward the water. "What's that?"

Something was moving underwater. It crested, and everyone gasped. It looked like a deformed, mutated version of an anglerfish. Meilin had heard of them—deep-sea hunters who lured their prey with brightly lit antennas. Double rows of jagged teeth lined the top and bottom of the fish's gaping mouth. Its translucent skin was covered in long spikes. It seemed to look right at Meilin with its large black eyes as it sped toward the boat.

"It's going to ram us!" Meilin yelled. "Hold on."

The fish exploded into the side of the boat, causing it to teeter dangerously to the left. Briggan howled as he slid toward the edge. Conor leaped forward and grabbed the wolf before he fell into the water.

“It’s circling back around!” Takoda said.

Kovo rushed to the side of the boat and stared as the fish raced toward them. He raised the paddle high above his head and brought it down right as the fish rammed into the boat again. The boat tilted sharply once more, and Takoda and Kovo went flying. Meilin jumped in the opposite direction, ramming her shoulder against the inside of the gourd in an attempt to stop it from turning completely over.

“Get to the center!” Meilin shouted. “Otherwise, we’ll sink!”

Everyone crawled to the middle of the boat and waited. At first it continued to rock violently, but after a few tense moments it slowed to a slight bob.

“Is it gone?” Conor asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Takoda replied. “Kovo must have stopped it.” He turned to his spirit animal and made a sign with his hands. Meilin had been seeing him use it more and more lately. *Thank you.*

Instead of replying, the Great Beast moved to the edge of the boat and looked into the water.

Takoda frowned. “Kovo? What is wrong? Do you think the fish is going to attack again?”

Kovo shook his head. He made a rowing motion with his hands, then pointed behind him.

“What?” Meilin asked. “You want to go in a different direction?” She turned to Conor. “Is that the way to the Wyrms?”

“It’s the paddle,” Takoda said. “Kovo must have dropped it during the last attack. It’s out there, somewhere in the sea.”

Meilin began frantically searching the water. “Does anyone see it?” She held up the orb, which was still stuck to her hands. “It’s probably somewhere behind us.”

“Even if it *is* back there, how are we going to reach it?” Takoda asked. “We don’t have any way to paddle backward. And we can’t swim with creatures like that in the water.”

“So we’re just supposed to sit here, do nothing, and let the current take us who knows where?” Meilin asked.

“It could be worse. At least we have a current,” Takoda said. “We should take inventory. I saw at least one bundle of supplies fly

overboard.”

Conor knelt in front of Meilin and inspected her hands. “Here, let me help you with that.” They both pulled, and eventually Conor was able to pry the orb from her palms, but not without taking a few layers of skin in the process.

Meilin wanted to kick the stupid orb into the water. They were adrift, without a way to navigate, and their handful of limited supplies had just become smaller.

They were at the total mercy of the Sulfur Sea, and it was all Meilin’s fault.



SAYYIDAH IOLYA

TASHA SAT IN THE CORNER OF THE SMALL, SIMPLE, one-room hut with Rollan, Abeke, and Madeo, and took in another spoonful of vegetable soup. Well, she wasn't actually sure *what* was in the soup, but thinking that the gray blobs floating in the brown liquid were some type of exotic root calmed her stomach. Abeke had almost finished her bowl, while Rollan and Madeo had already moved on to seconds. She would have given anything for some of Dante's special spices right then.

Across the room, Sayyidah Iolya, an elderly, hunchbacked woman, tended to Dante. He had barely been able to stand when they reached the woman's home. Once they described what had happened to him—and paid—she began preparing a solution for his arm in a large copper pot. Whatever the elixir was, it smelled even worse than the vegetable soup. Dante had screamed in pain when she first poured it over his swollen forearm. Now he was silent, and Tasha had no idea if this was better or worse.

After wrapping Dante's arm in a bandage, Sayyidah Iolya hobbled to them. "Your father was struck by a red-striped cottonmouth," she said to Rollan. "He's lucky that the bite was shallow ... and that you reached me when you did. If the snake had sunk its fangs farther into his flesh, he would already be dead and rotting."

"Thank you," Rollan said. "And he's *not* my father."

Tasha caught the edge in Rollan's voice. She thought about their conversation in Stetriol, about the Greencloak who had been like a father

to him. She knew he was no longer alive, though Rollan hadn't told her what had happened to him.

Sayyidah Iolya tapped her knotted, wooden cane on the dirt floor. "Whoever he is, he must remain here for four days. It will take that long for the poison and my antidote to work their way through his system." The woman grinned a crooked, toothless smile. "You realize that the lodging will cost extra, yes?"

Rollan scowled as he pulled a few coins from his bag. "Just in case you didn't recognize the cloaks, we're the good guys."

The woman took the coins and inspected them against a nearby candle flame. "Greencloak, Conqueror, merchant—I don't care what colors or emblems you wear, as long as you carry gold."

Tasha waited for the woman to return to Dante. "At least she didn't charge us for the vegetable soup," she said.

Rollan slowly turned to her. "Tasha, those aren't vegetables."

Tasha's stomach gurgled. "Do I want to know—?"

"No," Abeke, Rollan, and Madeo said at the same time.

Tasha put her bowl down on the gritty floor. Even at its worst, her life in Stetriol was nothing like this. "So now what do we do?"

"We can't wait for Dante to heal," Abeke said. "Madeo, do you know of any secret entrances into Zourtzi?"

Madeo's eyes widened. "The island fortress is impenetrable, and its sentries are cruel. None of us would dare try to sneak in," he said. "Which is too bad. Faisel's always throwing feasts. Some of the kids heard that he feeds entire cases of leftover hens to his hunting hounds."

"We have word that he's preparing another feast for his son to celebrate the arrival of Cabaro," Abeke said.

Madeo nodded. "A seven-day festival. Ships are set to arrive tomorrow. My friends at the pier say that they're coming from as far as Amaya."

Rollan and Abeke shared a long glance. "Word is spreading," Abeke said. "For all we know, Zerif may be on his way."

"With an army of infected Greencloaks at his side," Rollan muttered. "As if this day couldn't get any worse."

“There may be a way inside,” Madeo said. “For festivals this large, Sealy, the head chef, has brought in children to work as servants. He never picks the street kids, instead getting children from ‘respectable’ families who live by the river. Sealy’s already chosen his servants, but I’ll bet I can find three who are willing to swap places with you ... for the right price.”

Abeke nodded. “I suppose that’ll have to work.”

“I’ll send word tonight, and will meet you back here at dawn with your servants’ clothes.” Madeo rose from the floor and looked at Abeke. “Many of my friends love Cabaro, because he’s a lion and from Nilo. But I was always the fastest of my family. My favorite is Uraza.”

Abeke smiled, and in a flash, Uraza appeared. The leopard cautiously approached Madeo.

“You can touch her,” Abeke said. “She’s kind to those who are kind to her.”

The boy slowly placed his hand on the large beast’s back. “While Faisel and his family remained safe in Zourtzi, the rest of Caylif fell to the Conquerors,” Madeo said. “It was hard for us to survive. Many didn’t.” He removed his hand and took a step back. “Thank you for saving us.”

And with that, the boy exited the hut.

Tasha released Ninani. The bird sniffed at her bowl but didn’t eat. “Is being a Greencloak always like this?” she asked. “People expect so much of you. When I was home, all I had to worry about were completing my studies and tending to my chores.”

“Such is the life of a Greencloak,” Abeke said. “Though having a Great Beast draws even more attention.” Abeke petted Uraza, and she murmured a deep purr in response. “But as you just saw, it can also be rewarding.”

“We want you with us, on our side,” Rollan said. “But you don’t have to decide today. You have time.”

“But if Greenhaven has fallen, are there any Greencloaks left?” Tasha asked. “Is there even anything remaining to join?”

“There will always be Greencloaks,” Abeke said. She stretched out and pulled her cloak around herself, almost like a sleeping bag. “We’d

better get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“But at least we won’t have to eat rat stew if we’re working as servants,” Rollan added.

Tasha’s stomach churned. “Rats? You’re joking, right?”

Rollan’s laughter was the only response she received.



ZOURTZI

ABEKE TRIED NOT TO TUG AT HER STIFF GRAY SHIRT AND long, itchy black skirt. Madeo had been able to find three kids willing to give up their posts for a little free coin, while Abeke, Rollan, and Tasha took their places as servants. Abeke's skirt had been too long, but Tasha was able to quickly alter the hem to shorten it.

Abeke and Tasha stood at the edge of the pier along with twenty other girls. Rollan stood in a parallel line with the boys.

Two piers away, a group of uniformed guards stood in front of the *Tellun's Pride II*.

A pair of large guards, both dressed in black tunics and boots, stood at the front of each line. As the children stepped forward one by one, the guards gave them a quick once-over, then made a small mark on a parchment before allowing them to proceed onto the sailboat. Madeo and the other children had told Abeke not to worry about the list. The men checking them in had no idea what their servants looked like—they only had their names. Abeke had easily memorized her new name. She hoped Tasha had done the same.

Tasha was fidgeting in front of her, continually loosening and rebraiding a strand of her white-blond hair. Abeke placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Try to remain calm," she whispered. "Act like you belong."

Abeke picked up her backpack and took another step forward. She had been able to stuff her and Tasha's cloaks inside the bag, but she'd had to leave her bow and arrows with Sayyidah Iolya. Madeo had

promised to check in on Dante and fill him in on the plan. When Rollan tried to give Madeo the rest of the money, he had declined, saying he couldn't take any more money from the Heroes of Erdas.

There were only two children in front of them when Abeke heard a familiar voice.

"Sealy! I know you're in there!"

She glanced behind her. Otto, the merchant from the silk shop, limped past them, a new shiny black obsidian cane clacking with every other step. The guard at the front of the pier didn't speak, instead jerking his head to the boat. Otto grumbled but clumsily climbed the ramp and stepped onto the deck. He disappeared into a small cabin.

Tasha turned around. "Abeke—"

"Lower your voice," Abeke whispered. They took a step forward as another girl was allowed onto the boat. "Don't worry. Nothing will happen if you don't draw attention to yourself."

"We destroyed his shop yesterday," Tasha countered. "Dante sliced his leg. He's going to recognize us."

Abeke knew that they had to get inside Zourtzi, and that this was their only chance. But she also didn't want her desperation to cloud her judgment. She looked over and caught Rollan's eye. She raised an eyebrow as a question. He shook his head in response.

They were in agreement. They were getting on that boat.

"Just keep moving," she whispered, giving Tasha a slight nudge.

As Tasha reached the front of the line, Otto emerged from the cabin. Tasha was checked in and moved toward the boat as Otto began to hobble down the ramp.

Abeke placed her hand on her sleeve and readied herself to call Uraza. But as Tasha boarded, Otto walked right past her, not even glancing in her direction.

Abeke lowered her hand, told the steward her name, and stepped onto the boat. Rollan joined her and Tasha a few moments later.

"How did you know he wouldn't notice us?" Tasha asked. "I walked right by him. He had to have seen me."

"He's a rich, important man," Abeke replied. "And we are servants."

“It would be beneath him to even look at us,” Rollan added. “To him, kids like us barely exist.”

Tasha chewed on her lip as she looked out onto the harbor. Abeke didn't know much about Tasha's background, other than that she was probably wealthier than Abeke and Rollan. Unlike either of them, Tasha still had both of her parents.

Abeke wondered what her own mother would have said if she had been alive during Abeke's Nectar Ceremony. If she had seen Abeke call Uraza. From what she remembered of her, Abeke knew her mother would have reacted much more positively than her father had.

After all the children boarded, the sailboat departed.

“At least the *Tellun's Pride II* is still there,” Rollan whispered as they passed the ship. “Though with the number of men guarding it, I don't see us boarding anytime soon.”

“We'll have to worry about that later,” Abeke said. “I'm sure Dante could help us find another way out of Nilo.” She smiled. “Or maybe we could hide in my village. Soama could certainly make a meal better than rat stew.”

Tasha groaned. “Seriously. Was that really rat stew that I had been eating?” She covered her mouth. “I think I should sit down. I'm going to be seasick.”

Abeke, Rollan, and Tasha found a quiet spot along the railing to sit. Some of the other kids talked and joked with each other, but Abeke felt it was best if they kept to themselves. She still wasn't convinced that Tasha would be able to speak to the other children without revealing who they really were.

The sailboat, aided by the current and a fast wind, easily outpaced the larger, heavier boats in the open sea. It wasn't long until the majestic fort loomed before them. It was even more spectacular up close. The walls were white and almost looked polished. And its four towers seemed to stretch to the sun.

Rollan pointed to the water. “What types of rocks are those?”

Abeke frowned at the row of pale, angular shapes just underneath the water's surface. The boat cruised a few lengths away from them. Any closer and the rocks would have cut deep gashes into the ship's hull.

“It’s some type of cement,” Tasha said. “It’s man-made.”

“So they somehow created a rock reef to ward off ships?” Rollan asked. “Hopefully it’s easier to get out of this place than in.”

The boat slowed as it neared the stone-bricked pier. The children lined up and disembarked onto a wide gangplank once it had docked. The pier connected to a large promenade shaded by billowing palm and juniper trees. Up ahead, a large, manicured lawn stretched out before a series of wide, steep ivory steps. The steps were like a triangle, wide at the bottom and slowly narrowing as they reached the massive granite double doors at their apex.

Abeke tried not to stare at the guards lined along the steps. Unlike the typical Niloan garb, they all wore black clothes with heavy metal chain mail. Some wore stripes on their shoulders. *Perhaps it’s some type of rank*, she thought. Each carried a long, curved sword, similar to the ones that the men at the silk shop had used.

She and the others were ushered through a large foyer and down a massive corridor to the servants’ chambers. There, they were greeted by the main servants. Unlike the children’s clothes, the regular servant uniform looked much more comfortable and practical.

Abeke was given her initial duties and was then assigned to her sleeping quarters. She, Tasha, and a young, waifish girl with short brown hair were assigned into a room together. However, before the main servants led them to their quarters, Rollan pulled the brown-haired girl to the side and whispered something to her, quietly slipping her a coin. He grinned as he returned to Abeke and Tasha.

“It seems that everyone’s a businessperson in this city,” he said, picking up Abeke’s bag. “Let’s go check out our quarters.”

The room was small but adequate. Two beds lined the wall farthest from the door, and the other bed stood underneath a small window.

Rollan glanced out the window. “Lucky Essix. Better to be out there than in here.” He flopped on the bed, then winced.

Abeke sat down on the hard bed. “Rollan, were you assigned a task?”

He shook his head as he leaned back, placing his hands behind his neck. “I’m supposed to report to the kitchen in an hour for mine,” he said.

“Me too,” Tasha said. “Since we don’t have to report for a while, maybe we should look for Cabaro now.”

“I don’t think that’s wise,” Abeke said. “It would arouse too much suspicion if we were seen sneaking around, and it could jeopardize our mission.” She opened her bag and pulled out a dagger. “Plus, I already know where to find Cabaro.”

Rollan sat up. “What? You sense him with those cat-reflexes of yours?”

“Funny,” she said, smiling. “But no, that isn’t it. I’ve been assigned to act as one of Kirat’s servants.”

“*What?* They’re letting us *kids* serve Faisel’s family?” Rollan asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Abeke shrugged. “From the way I understand it, the regular servants are responsible for attending to all the fancy guests arriving later today. We’ve been relegated to serving the less important people—like his child.” She tucked the dagger into her boot and smoothed her dress. “Wish me luck.”



Abeke and five other servants stood in the service corridor leading to one of the fortress’s many dining chambers. Each servant carried a dish, some two. Abeke held a steaming bowl of warm towels in her hands. Even with the three thick kitchen towels blocking her fingers from the bowl, her skin burned. But she didn’t dare complain. Sealy, the head chef, had already reassigned one child when he accidentally spilled a drop of mango juice on the pristine tiled kitchen floor.

“Line up against the far wall as soon as you enter Master Kirat’s dining quarters,” Ahmar said. He was one of the regular servants and had been tasked with overseeing Abeke’s group. “Whatever you do, do not look directly into Kirat’s or Cabaro’s eyes.” He lowered his voice. “Especially Cabaro. He’s already maimed two servants. But if you keep your head down and limit any sudden movements, you should come out of this with all your digits intact.”

Ahmar knocked on the door three times. When no one answered, he opened the door and led the servants in. The room was massive. Large,

scarlet silk curtains hung over each window, casting the room in a dull, reddish tint. Mounted animal heads sat on each wall. Abeke was glad that none of them were leopards.

The focal point of the room was a large, exquisitely carved round wooden table. It was large enough to seat at least twelve people, though only one throne-sized chair stood at the far end. Ahmar placed two gold and ivory utensils on the table, then returned to the wall with the other servants.

The main door swung open. A few men walked in, their boots loud against the floor. They were followed by a tall boy wearing beige linen clothes and gold rings on his fingers. He must have been Kirat.

Then Cabaro appeared.

The girl next to Abeke sucked in her breath, and the plate of eggs wobbled in her hand. Glancing down the line, Abeke could tell that the other servants were equally as rattled.

Cabaro slowly approached the table, his tail lazily swishing back and forth. He looked slightly larger than a normal lion. Like the other reborn Great Beasts, he was a shadow of his former self, yet Abeke reminded herself that he was still a lion.

He yawned, showing all of his white, sharp teeth.

The last time Abeke had seen Cabaro, he had been charging into the Evertree, sacrificing his life to save Erdas. She wondered if any memory of that act remained.

Ahmar snapped to attention as another man entered the room. With the way everyone nodded and bowed at him, including Kirat, he must have been Faisel. His physical traits reminded Abeke of the people of both Zhong and Northern Nilo. She assumed that he was of dual heritage, like Takoda.

Faisel rubbed his graying beard as he inspected the line of servants against the wall. “Do not worry; Cabaro has already eaten.” He smiled at the smallest of them—a light-skinned Euran boy with freckles and brown hair. “Though perhaps he would be interested in dessert.”

Faisel laughed, filling the silent room. Cabaro yawned again, then flopped down on the floor and began grooming himself. He didn’t seem to notice anyone in the room—the servants, the men, or even his human

partner, Kirat. The boy had stretched out his arm and was whispering something to the lion, but Cabaro just continued to lick his paws with his tongue.

Faisel turned and saw his son kneeling before the lion. “Kirat,” he snapped. The boy jumped to his feet. “Must you display your shortcomings in front of the entire staff?”

“But I thought ... it felt like—”

“I do not care about your excuses,” Faisel said. “Only results.” Then he joined the other men. They had pulled off to a corner of the room. “When will my son learn how to force his animal into a dormant state?” he demanded, his voice overshadowing all others. “I am paying you far too much for these continued failures.”

Abeke felt sorry for Kirat as the men tried to explain what she already knew. It required trust for a spirit animal to willingly enter the dormant state. It had taken almost a week for Uraza to trust her enough to become passive, and even longer for Rollan and the independent Essix. There was no telling how long it would take Cabaro—if ever. But from her limited observations of Faisel, she could tell that anything other than immediate success would be considered a disappointment.

Kirat slipped into the large chair. “I’m ready to begin,” he said, his voice stronger than before.

Ahmar walked to the table, unrolled a linen napkin, and draped it across Kirat’s lap. Then he clapped his hands. The first two servants moved forward. One placed a glass of juice in front of the boy, and the other placed a plate of fruit.

Kirat took three bites of his fruit and a sip of the juice. “Next,” he commanded.

Abeke frowned as Ahmar collected the plates. *He’s finished already?*

This continued with each plate. Eggs, smoked fish, baked bread—no matter the food, Kirat only took a few bites before discarding the plate. How could he be so wasteful, when an entire city was starving just beyond his walls?

“Towels,” he snapped.

It took Ahmar clearing his throat for Abeke to realize that this was her cue. She quickly crossed the room and placed the warm bowl before

Kirat. Like Otto the merchant and all the other important people she had encountered, Kirat refused to meet her gaze.

Suddenly, one of the servants shrieked.

Abeke turned around. Cabaro had risen to his feet and was walking toward her!

Kirat stood as well. “Cabaro! Be still!”

The lion almost seemed to laugh at the boy’s command—a low, rumbling sound issued from his throat. He continued forward, his tail now dragging against the floor. Perhaps Kirat would not look at Abeke, but Cabaro did. He gazed at her almost quizzically. It was as if he recognized her, but he didn’t know how, or from where.

Abeke placed her hand on her sleeve but didn’t move. She didn’t want to call Uraza, but if he attacked, she wouldn’t have any choice.

“Ahmar, summon the guards,” Kirat said.

“You will do no such thing,” Faisel said, crossing the room. “I will not have one hair on this magnificent beast harmed.”

Cabaro took another step toward Abeke and sniffed the air. His eyes flashed. It seemed he suddenly realized who she was—and also probably realized which Great Beast she could call forth. Abeke had grown up hearing stories of the rivalry between Uraza and Cabaro. Both were native to Nilo. Both claimed to be the greatest hunter in the land.

Cabaro continued to glare at Abeke. He bared his teeth but didn’t roar or advance. She wasn’t sure, but it almost seemed as if his gaze kept shifting from Abeke’s eyes to her arm. Then he snorted and withdrew, his eyes on Abeke the entire time. He flopped back onto the floor and returned to grooming himself.

Abeke slowly lowered her hand. Was Cabaro afraid to face Uraza? Or was he merely too lazy to be bothered with a confrontation right then?

Faisel clapped his hands and laughed, breaking the tension in the room. “It seems that Cabaro has finally met his match.” He pointed to Abeke but kept his eyes on his son. “For the rest of the week, she will act as your primary server. And if you’re lucky, maybe she’ll also teach you how to control your lion.”



FAST FRIENDS

ROLLAN BROKE OFF A SMALL PIECE OF THE LOAF OF bread that Sayyidah Iolya had given them and tossed it to Essix. Essix stared at the bread for a few seconds, then pushed it around with her beak.

“Trust me,” he said, popping a piece into his mouth. “It’s actually pretty good.”

Essix finally picked up the bread, tilted her head back, and swallowed it whole.

Rollan was surprised that Essix had remained in the small room for as long as she had. She hated enclosed spaces. But having her here was good. Focusing on Essix took his mind off other things. Other people. Abeke. Dante. Conor.

Meilin.

He squeezed the stiff loaf of bread. Here he was, safely hidden away in one of the most spectacular fortresses he had ever seen, while Meilin was trapped underground with Takoda and Conor ... and Kovo, easily the most menacing and untrustworthy of the Great Beasts. She would have loved Zourtzi—the architecture was a mix of Niloan and Zhongese styles. Perhaps it would have reminded her of home.

And what about Conor? Even with the healing properties of Jhi, how much longer could Conor last before the parasite took total control of his body and mind? Rollan had seen firsthand what the parasite could do. He was sure that he’d never forget the empty look in Arac’s eyes as Rollan fought him on the deck of the *Tellun’s Pride II*. He’d never forget the way Arac’s body twisted and turned as it fell overboard into the dark sea.

Rollan had only known Arac for a few days and was still haunted by his attack. How would Meilin feel if Conor attacked *her*?

Essix flapped her wings, getting Rollan's attention. "Okay, but after this, I'm cutting you off," he said, tossing her another piece of bread. Then he glanced at Tasha. "Why don't you find some *rats* to chew on or something?"

Tasha groaned on the other side of the room. "Not funny!" Like Rollan, she was feeding her spirit animal. She tossed a piece of bread to Ninani, but it went way off the mark and instead hit the wall behind the swan.

"I thought Ninani was supposed to make you more graceful."

She sighed. "That *is* more graceful."

Rollan laughed. "So what was life like for you before we showed up? I'm guessing that they didn't serve a lot of rodent delicacies in that fancy castle you were living in."

Now Tasha laughed. "I was practically a stranger in that castle. I had only been living there for a few days before you and Abeke arrived. Even then, I wasn't permitted to roam the halls by myself. There was always some official looking over me, taking notes and scribbling down everything that Ninani and I did." Ninani waddled to her, and she began to stroke the white swan's back. "Before the war, my family lived in a small village farther inland, close to the mountains. My father was the town's farrier." Rollan must have been frowning, because she said, "A farrier is kind of like a blacksmith, but only for horses. The terrain in Stetriol is very rocky. When it comes to hauling equipment or plowing fields, a horse without a good pair of shoes is about as useful as a potbellied pig."

"I'd take a pig over a horse any day," Rollan murmured. "So what happened when the war broke out? Did your father become one of the Conquerors?"

"They asked him, but he refused. He saw what that drink did to the animals—"

"Bile," Rollan said. He could hear the contempt in his voice.

"Yes, the Bile. They had used it on some horses in his care. Most bulked up immediately, transforming from quiet, graceful creatures into

something twisted and sinister. I thought that was bad, until I saw what happened when an animal couldn't take the transition. The horses would shudder and break down and ...” Her voice trailed off as she shook her head. “So no, my father refused to drink the Bile and join the Reptile King's army. They instead used him as a blacksmith. But not for the animals. He made weapons. Swords, axes, whatever they required.” She fed Ninani the last of her bread. “He hated it, but it allowed him to provide for us. Food was always scarce, but we never went hungry.” Tasha looked at Rollan, and her blue eyes cut into him. “What was life like for you before the war?”

“Less fighting. More rats.” He stood up. “Sometimes, I think I preferred the rats.”

“But you chose this path. You chose to be a Greencloak. Why?”

“We all have a duty. Even a street kid like me.” Rollan scooped up Essix and walked to the window. “See you tonight,” he said to the falcon. “Do me a favor and check on Dante, okay? And let me know if you see any messages from Lenori or Olvan.”

The bird seemed to nod in acknowledgment, then took off.

Rollan thought about trying to tap into Essix's vision, but decided against it. He didn't want to become sick again, not when he'd have to report to the kitchen soon. Still, he wanted to get a better look at Zourtzi. If it was really that impenetrable, then maybe Zerif wouldn't be able to enter after all. Maybe Cabaro would be better off staying here. And perhaps it would be safe for other spirit animals as well. Tasha wanted to be a Greencloak, but she needed time to think about what she was signing up for. She needed a safe place to think. And maybe this was it.

He turned to see that Tasha had risen from the floor. The sunlight shining in through the window caught her braided hair. It was piled high on her head, and the sunlight made it look that much blonder. “What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Just wondering if they're going to make me serve the fortress's dogs or Faisel himself,” he said. “Not that one's better than the other.”

Tasha continued toward him. She rose up on her toes and peered out the window. “Abeke warned me that you were good at evading people,” she said. “She was right.”

He rubbed the back of his head. “It takes me a while to warm up to people. Back home, you couldn’t really trust anyone, not even other orphans. They’d get close to you, only to steal your clothes or food. Or turn you in to the militia. Or worst, the orphanages.”

“But you came to trust the Greencloaks,” she said. “Was it because of the man you mentioned before? Travis?”

“Tarik,” Rollan corrected. Just saying his name out loud made Rollan’s throat hurt. “Yes, he was a great mentor, and someone I came to trust with my life. But he wasn’t the only reason I joined. Abeke, Conor, and Meilin had a lot to do with it as well.” He frowned as a large smile spread across Tasha’s face. “What?” he demanded.

“Nothing. Just the way your face looked when you mentioned Meilin’s name,” she said. “It’s clear that you care about her.”

“You would like her. Eventually,” he said. “You’d especially like Conor. He’s a lot like you, but less clumsy. And he’s one of the kindest, most loyal people I’ve ever met.”

Tasha’s face fell. “There it was again. Something in your face—in your voice—when you talked about Conor. Is he okay?”

Rollan squinted at Ninani. “Are you doing this to her?” he asked. “Enhancing her senses or something? Or is she always this inquisitive?”

Ninani flapped her wings. He wasn’t exactly sure, but he thought that the swan might have winked at him.

“All right, enough with all the talking.” He pulled a dagger from his bag and, like Abeke, slid it inside his boot. “Time to go to work.”



LAREIMAJA

WITH AS MUCH FOOD AS WAS STACKED ON TOP OF THE kitchen counters, it was apparent that Sealy and his staff had been cooking since early that morning. However, there wasn't a drop of food on his immaculate white linen jacket.

He frowned at each of the children lined up against the wall. "Let me be clear," he said. "You all are the worst of the worst. The only reason you all even made it inside the fortress is because I needed forty servants instead of twenty-five." He stopped in front of a small boy. Tasha assumed that he couldn't be much older than eight. He was supposed to be outside, playing with his friends, not getting yelled at by an oversized bully.

"Most of you will be responsible for cleaning the floors and the horse stalls. Some get to polish those ivory stairs outside. But two of you get the *extreme* honor of tending to Lady LaReimaja." He continued walking. "So who will it be?"

None of the kids moved forward. It really said something about the family's reputation that the kids would pick mopping and sweeping to serving Faisel's wife. Tasha looked at Rollan, hoping to catch his attention, but his eyes remained glued to the ground.

There was a quiet cough to Tasha's left. Her stomach sank—it was the small boy from before. He tried to freeze back into position, but it was too late.

"Ah, the runt," Sealy said. "Think you got what it takes to serve our lady?"

The boy looked at the ground and shook his head.

“What’s wrong, boy? Can’t talk?” He leaned closer to the child, who was shaking in his small brown loafers. “You even think about not speaking when Lord Faisel addresses you, and he’ll make you a permanent mute.”

The boy uttered a weak, “Yes, sir.”

“Are you even strong enough to carry a tray?” Sealy poked the boy in the shoulder, causing him to stumble backward. “If you spill so much as one drop of my—”

“I will volunteer,” Tasha said. She took a step forward, hoping that she wouldn’t trip over her clumsy feet. “I would be honored to serve the lady,” Tasha said.

Sealy marched to her. “Think you got what it takes, blondie?”

Tasha willed herself not to back down. “I know I do, sir,” she said.

“Well, you’ve got guts.” Sealy smirked. “But Lord Faisel isn’t afraid to cut those out of kids as well.”

Tasha didn’t respond to Sealy’s horrible joke. She wasn’t some county girl from Stetriol anymore. She was a Greencloak. Or, a Greencloak-in-training. Or, whatever. All she knew was that she couldn’t stand there and watch that boy get bullied.

“So, it’s you and the runt, then.”

“I’d like to volunteer as well.”

Tasha sighed. *Rollan.*

Sealy walked to Rollan. “I don’t need three of you,” he said.

“I’ll go in his place,” Rollan said, nodding to the boy.

Sealy poked Rollan hard in the chest. Rollan must have been anticipating it, because his feet somehow remained in place, and his body didn’t bend. “At least you look like you could carry a tray of food.” Sealy pointed toward two large platters, each stacked with food, then rattled off directions. “And don’t drop those plates,” he added as Tasha and Rollan exited the kitchen.

Tasha remained quiet as she followed Rollan down the corridor. He was walking too quickly for her to catch up and see his face. Was he so upset with her that he couldn’t even talk?

Finally, she said, “I know you’re mad. I’m sorry. I’m just ... I don’t like bullies.”

Rollan stopped walking. His eyes were too blank for Tasha to read. “Yeah, what you did was a little crazy,” he said. “But you did the right thing.”

“So you’re not mad? I thought, since you weren’t saying anything—”

He shook his head. “No, I was thinking about what Meilin would have done. She doesn’t like bullies, either. Remind me to tell you about how she jumped into shark-infested waters to save some whales.”

There it was again—that sadness. While she could often feel Ninani enhancing her powers of perception, she didn’t need the Great Beast’s help to see this.

“I’m sure she’s okay,” Tasha said. “From what I’ve heard, she’s one of the Greencloaks’ finest warriors.”

Rollan nodded. “If by finest you mean most stubborn, then yes, you’re correct.” He regripped his tray, and they continued walking. “Plus, do you know how big this place is? If we were on cleaning duty, we’d be mopping all day.”

They continued down another long corridor before coming to a grand dining hall. Tasha cautiously entered the room. Large, multicolored tapestries hung from the ceiling to the floor of each wall. She had known many weavers in Stetriol, and knew that it would have taken them months to create artwork so exquisite.

Tasha took a few more steps into the room. “Hello?” she called out.

“Please, come in,” a woman said. Tasha hadn’t seen her before she spoke. The woman wore a loose, flowing red dress, causing her to almost blend in with the room’s satin curtains. She moved away from the window. “I’m LaReimaja,” she said. “You must be the new servants Faisel hired. You may put those on the table.”

Tasha started to move forward, then suddenly went flying. She tried to grab the plates on her tray as she fell, which only caused her to land even harder on the woven rug.

Rollan rushed to her. “Tasha?” he whispered.

“I’m fine,” she said. Most of her plates had overturned, spilling dates, grains, and slices of bread on the floor. Luckily, none of the dishes had

broken. Then she noticed the overturned bowl of butter she had been carrying. She crawled to it and flipped it over. The soft butter had already begun to seep into the carpet.

“Oh no,” she moaned as she tried to sop it up with the edge of her dress.

“My dear, it’s okay,” LaReimaja said as she knelt beside Tasha. The lady pointed to Rollan. “There are some towels in the adjacent room,” she said to him.

As Rollan ran off, Tasha dared to look at the woman. Lady LaReimaja was very beautiful, with warm features and dark tan skin. Her friendly eyes were the color of coffee, a drink that the Greencloaks had brought with them to Stetriol and which smelled to Tasha like earth and honey. “I’m am so, so sorry,” Tasha began. “Your carpet—”

“—is just that. Only a carpet.” LaReimaja began picking up the scattered food. Then she paused and placed her hands against one of the green-and-yellow floral designs woven into the rug. “With as much time as I spend in this room, I tend to forget that this carpet is even here.” She patted it. “It’s one of my favorites. I made it years ago. Another lifetime.”

Rollan returned with a few towels in his hands. He hesitated once he reached them, his eyes on LaReimaja. “Will these work?” he finally asked.

“Thank you. These will be fine,” LaReimaja said, taking one of the towels. She began blotting the carpet where the soft butter had spilled. “Why don’t you try to wipe up that jam?” she said to Rollan.

Rollan moved to another part of the carpet and did as he was instructed, but Tasha noticed how, every so often, he would turn and gaze at the woman, each glance longer than the one before. It was as if he was searching her face for something.

Maybe LaReimaja reminded him of his mother. Tasha certainly felt that way. As they worked together to clean up the mess, Tasha thought back to how she and her mother would work together to clean the house while her father traveled from village to village, taking care of people’s horses.

She hoped that she would see her parents again, and that they were safe.

Tasha noticed that LaReimaja had cleaned up all the butter and was now patting the carpet again.

“It’s really beautiful,” Tasha said, touching the carpet as well. “Did you also create the tapestries?”

LaReimaja nodded. “I probably knew how to weave before I could walk. My family owned a carpet shop in the market—my siblings and I would weave the carpets at night and sell them during the day. But after marrying Faisel, I no longer had to make carpets for profit. I could truly engage in the art of loommanship.” She sighed. “However, there are only so many tapestries you can weave before even that becomes mundane.”

Tasha returned to scooping up the grain. She had almost finished when a large, bearded man entered the room. “What is this?” he demanded.

LaReimaja quickly rose to her feet. Tasha started to get up, but LaReimaja nudged her back to the carpet. “It’s nothing, Faisel,” she said, dropping the towel.

“Did these servants—”

“It was my fault,” she said as she rushed to her husband. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was walking. I collided with the girl and caused her to spill everything.” She took Faisel’s arm and led him to the table. “But there is plenty of food on the other tray if you would like to eat.”

“I have more things to worry about than food,” he said, shaking her arm away. “Our guests begin arriving tonight, and your son still can’t control his spirit animal.”

“Cabaro isn’t any ordinary spirit animal,” LaReimaja said. “And I don’t think the connection works like that. It’s a partnership—”

“If I didn’t know any better, I would say that you sound like a Greencloak.” He picked up a date and bit into it. “I’ve doubled the guards. There’s no way that Dante and his band of Greencloaks are getting inside this castle.”

Tasha had finished cleaning up the food near her, but didn’t dare move to a different location. A few paces away, Rollan pretended to

clean the same spot in the carpet, over and over again.

“I know you don’t favor the Greencloaks, but they may be able to help Kirat,” LaReimaja said as she offered Faisel another date. “They cannot be any worse than all those advisers you hired.”

“Well, you’re right about that—those *experts* are useless. I’ve already dismissed most of them.” He picked up another date. At this rate, Tasha assumed there would be nothing left for LaReimaja to eat. “But an interesting thing happened during Kirat’s breakfast. One of the servants actually stood up to Cabaro. And the lion backed down.”

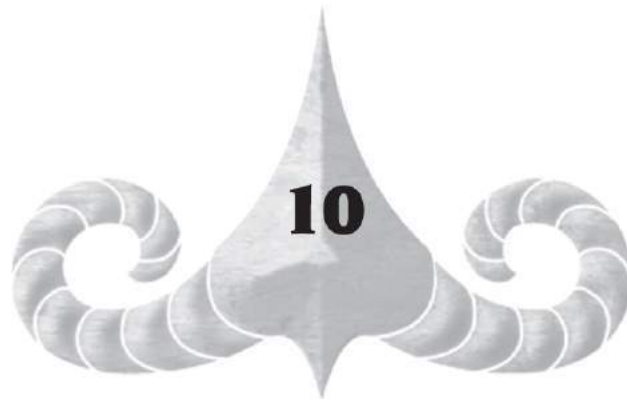
“Who? Was it Ahmar?”

Faisel smiled, causing a tremor to run through Tasha’s body. He reminded her of the Reptile King’s crocodile. She had seen it once, from afar, during the war. “No, it was one of the new servants. A girl with braids—probably from the savannahs, by the look of her.”

Tasha and Rollan looked at each other. *Abeke*.

LaReimaja sighed. “Faisel, you promised not to expose the younger servants to Cabaro. Remember what happened to the milk girl?”

Faisel shrugged. “It’s just some village girl. Better for her to lose a few fingers than one of my staff.” He picked up the last of the dates, then walked toward the door. He paused before exiting. “LaReimaja, make sure those servants clean that carpet so it’s spotless. I would hate for someone else to lose a few fingers.”



ADRIFT

LIKE IT HAD BEEN YESTERDAY, AND THE DAY BEFORE, and perhaps even the day before that, the water surrounding their small boat was still, dark, and quiet.

Conor couldn't go to sleep.

He was bone tired, and the many days of remaining so inactive in the boat had made his muscles loose, almost as if they were beginning to forget how to work. He knew that if he slept, he would be able to escape from the dryness in his mouth and the ache in his stomach, at least for a little while.

But every time Conor began to drift off to sleep, he could feel the Wyrms probing his mind. Trying to control him. The whispers had grown louder. And his dreams, once filled with images from the green fields of Trunswick, were now dark and troubling. When he closed his eyes, he still returned to his homeland, but the once-green grass was now dead and brown. Trees and fences were stained with blood. A battle raged throughout the town, with him and the Many on one side, and his friends on the other. And his friends were losing.

Briggan nudged his leg, pulling him out of his current thoughts. He scratched the wolf's muzzle. Conor knew he should put Briggan into his passive state. He was the only animal on the boat—even Kovo had agreed to return to the tattoo on Takoda's neck once they realized that he could no longer help with the rowing. Conor had found a few scraps of leathery, stale jerky deep in his pockets, but that was almost gone. Soon,

all that would be left was the rockweed. He wasn't sure if Briggan would even eat it.

He thought about searching through their meager supplies to find something—anything—for Briggan to eat, but he would have to depend more on touch than sight, and that would wake everyone up.

They were down to their last wooden torch. The two glowing spheres that Takoda had found in the caves had already dulled from warm green to dark brown. And the orb that had been attached to the anglerfish had gone dark only a few moments after being separated from the fish.

Conor knew that Meilin felt responsible for everything that had happened during the attack. They had lost their paddle and were now at the mercy of the current. Conor still believed they would make it to the Evertree—eventually. The current seemed to be slowly pulling them in the direction of the Wym. He just hoped he could hold on to his sanity until then.

And then what? he wondered. How were they going to defeat the Wym? They could barely escape an anglerfish.

Briggan nudged his leg again. “I’m sorry, was I drifting again?” he asked. Then he looked at Briggan, his ears sitting straight up on his head, the fur on his neck stiff.

“What is it?” Conor asked.

Briggan looked at Conor, then turned his attention back to whatever was out there. Conor calmed himself and tried to push away everything clogging his mind. Eventually, he found Briggan in the abyss and tapped into his power. The world became even quieter for a second, and then he heard it. Talking. No ... singing.

Someone was out there on the water.

“Wake up, guys!” Conor yelled. He shook Meilin and then Takoda. “Do you hear that? It’s singing.” He pointed. “It’s coming from that way.”

Meilin shook her head, causing her black hair to cascade over her eyes. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Me neither,” Takoda said.

“I couldn’t either, not at first,” Conor said. “But Briggan is helping to enhance my senses.” He rubbed the wolf’s flank. “You hear it, too,

right?”

The wolf howled, then nodded. He shakily rose from the belly of the boat, padded to the edge, and pointed his snout in the same direction that Conor had indicated.

Meilin began pulling her hair into a ponytail. “It could just be the wind,” she said. “Or worse, another strange animal intent on killing us.”

“No,” Conor said. “I hear words.” He went silent and let himself tap into Briggan’s hearing. “I’m positive. It’s a group of people singing.”

Takoda pursed his lips together as he studied Conor. It was clear that Takoda was focusing on the black mark making its way up Conor’s neck.

“It’s not the parasite or the Wurm,” Conor added defiantly. “I’m sure.” But was he? How could he even trust his senses?

“Well, even if it is singing, there isn’t much we can do about it,” Takoda said. “It’s not like we can paddle ourselves to them.”

Meilin shifted her body and crossed her arms. Conor knew that Takoda hadn’t been trying to scold or blame Meilin, but she clearly took it that way.

“We have one other option,” Conor said. “We can light the last torch.”

Takoda rubbed his jaw. “I don’t know, Conor. It’s not that I don’t trust you—”

“Then what is it?” Conor asked, his voice hard.

“What if you’re wrong?” Takoda asked. “We might use our last torch, and then be totally in the dark.”

“We’re running out of food,” Conor said. *And out of time*, he almost added. “Those people out there could help us.”

“Or they could be our enemy,” Meilin said. She slowly stood and moved closer to the two boys. “Or we could light the torch and go unnoticed, and we would be right back in the same position, except without any other light.” Meilin scratched the tattoo on the back of her hand. “Jhi enhances my abilities in many ways, but not in hearing or sight,” she said. “Does Kovo?”

Takoda shook his head. “No. At least not yet. But there’s much about our bond that I still don’t understand.”

Meilin looked into Conor’s eyes. “Are you sure about this?”

“I think it’s our best chance,” Conor said.

“Then that’s good enough for me,” Meilin said. “Takoda?”

He exhaled long and hard, before finally nodding. “I don’t agree, but I’ll defer to your wisdom.” He picked up the torch and handed it to Conor. “You’re the tallest. You give us the best chance of being seen.”

“We should tie it to my quarterstaff with some rope,” Meilin said. She began rummaging through the boat. “That will get it even higher.”

Once they’d lashed the torch onto the staff, Conor lit it and hoisted it high above his head.

“I would call Kovo to hold it,” Takoda said, “but I’m afraid that he would just put it out. He’s ... not your biggest fan. I don’t know if he would believe you.”

“Are you talking about me or Conor?” Meilin asked.

“Um, both of you,” he replied.

Conor tried to ignore their banter, and instead focused on holding the torch high above his head. He tried to wave it a few times, but after almost dropping it, he decided it would be best to hold it still. But his hands were slippery with sweat, and his shoulders ached. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep it raised.

Suddenly, Jhi appeared beside Conor. “Please help him, Jhi,” Meilin said. “Conor needs all his concentration to keep the staff still and high.”

Conor immediately felt his heart rate slow down. His arms burned, but not nearly as much. The panda had placed her body right beside Conor, causing everything else to fade away to the background.

Conor looked up. The torch, once blazing bright, had begun to die down. He still hadn’t seen any response from the dark sea. The singing seemed to have stopped, but Conor didn’t know if that was because Jhi was suppressing the outside world, helping Conor focus on the here and now.

Then, finally, a blue light ignited far in the distance. Then another, and a third after that. Jhi pulled away from him, and the real world came rushing back.

“I think they see us,” Meilin said. She took the staff from Conor. “And now, we wait.”



THE *MELEAGER*

CONOR WAS THE FIRST TO SEE THE SMALL SKIFF MAKING its way through the water to them. All Takoda and Meilin could see was a blue glowstone slowly floating through the darkness. For all Takoda knew, it was another anglerfish and not a boat. But perhaps none of that mattered anymore. Whatever it was, it was on its way, and there was nothing that Takoda and the others could do about it anymore.

Takoda picked up his cloak and fastened it around his shoulders. He pulled it high in order to hide Kovo's mark on his neck. "They'll be here soon. You should probably ask your spirit animals to return to passive form before then."

Meilin leaned over and stared Jhi in the eyes. A second later, she disappeared.

"Conor, did you hear me?" Takoda asked.

Conor looked at Briggan, then at Meilin. "Don't let me fall asleep before releasing him," Conor said.

Meilin frowned. "Conor, nothing is going to happen—"

"Just promise me!" he yelled, his face becoming twisted and angry. He kicked out at a random bag—the one containing what remained of their rockweed. Takoda yelped and caught it just before it went over the edge of the boat.

Meilin held her hands up in front of her. "Conor, you have to calm down," she said, her voice barely audible over the sound of water lapping against the boat. "You're rocking the boat too much. Look at Briggan."

The wolf's legs wobbled underneath him as he tried to position himself between Conor and Meilin. Briggan whimpered, but kept moving until he had blocked Conor from her.

Conor blinked, and his blue eyes returned to normal. "I'm ... I'm so sorry." He hid his face in his hands. "What's happening to me?"

Meilin placed her hand on Conor's shoulder. "Just ask Briggan to return to his dormant state," she said. "He won't do it if he doesn't trust you."

Conor nodded. Seconds later, the Great Wolf vanished in a flash.

"See," Meilin said. "Briggan believes in you, and so do I. You can beat this, Conor."

Instead of answering, Conor retreated to the far side of the boat, away from Meilin and Takoda.

Takoda stepped toward Meilin as she continued to pack their supplies. "The ship will be here soon," Takoda said. "It would be nice to get a real meal. You know, something better than rockweed. Maybe even something warm. Or sweet." He cast another look at Conor, who was silently staring off into the sea. "It will also give us a chance to rest and restock our supplies. We have to be at full strength in order to face what's ahead."

Meilin stopped packing the bag. "Takoda, cut the small talk. Neither of us have the time or energy to tiptoe around whatever's on your mind. Just say it, and let's get this over with."

Takoda felt his face warm. He wasn't used to someone being so blunt. The monks, while direct, often found a way to soften their displeasure with their tone and choice of words. That was *not* Meilin's way.

"Conor isn't getting better," Takoda whispered. "You remember what Xanthe said. They weren't able to save any of the Many."

"He will be different."

"Meilin—"

"You worry about keeping Kovo in line. I'll take care of Conor," she said. "Now, are we done?" she asked, starting to move away. "The ship will be here soon."

Takoda slid in front of her, blocking her path. "I promise I'm not trying to be difficult. I *am* hoping for the best for Conor. But we need a

contingency plan.”

Meilin’s eyes narrowed. She picked up her quarterstaff and spun it in her hands. “As I said, I will take care of Conor. One way or another. Understood?”

Takoda nodded and stepped out of her way. Their confrontation was just another example of how she reminded him of Kovo. Both were willing to do what they felt was necessary, perhaps even at the sake of their own souls. He couldn’t imagine attacking one of the monks from his monastery. But Kovo had battled the other Great Beasts because he believed he was right and they were wrong. And now, Meilin was willing to face her friend if Conor eventually turned. Would Takoda ever be as brave as them?

He finished packing his belongings, then joined Meilin and Conor at the starboard side of the boat.

Across the yellow sea, the skiff was now close enough for him to see it. Oars moved in sync as they sliced through the water. In. Out. Up. Down. Back. Forth.

“One thing is certain,” Meilin said. “They aren’t infected. There’s no way that the Many would be so organized.”

The strangers’ glowstone went dark as the skiff came to a stop. Takoda could make out faint humanoid silhouettes on the boat—it almost looked like the people were blue-skinned. A horn blew in the distance. “Identify yourselves,” someone yelled from the skiff. “What city do you hail from?”

Meilin pointed to herself, and Takoda nodded in agreement. Then she leaned forward. “We are travelers, new to this land,” she yelled, her voice sounding much stronger than her slight build would have indicated. “We became adrift in the Sulfur Sea and have been at the mercy of the currents ever since.” She looked at Conor. “We would be grateful for any assistance.”

“And what can you offer us in return for our help?” the person on the other ship replied.

Meilin covered her mouth. “Great,” she whispered. “Pirates.” She turned back toward the ship and cupped her hands around her mouth. “We don’t have anything of value on hand, but if you take us aboard

your vessel and give us safe passage, we'll find a means to compensate you."

"In other words, you have nothing to pay or barter!"

"No! We have considerable wealth," Meilin said. "It just ... isn't here."

"And where is it? At the bottom of the sea?" Takoda thought he heard laughter from the pirate boat. "Unless you own gills, your treasure is now useless to you."

Takoda leaned over toward Meilin. "The truth?" he whispered.

Meilin shrugged, then nodded. "It's ... aboveground," she yelled. "We are from Erdas."

Silence passed between the two boats for a few minutes. Takoda was not a fighter, but he would have felt more at ease with a weapon in his hand.

The boat began moving again, and the skiff's glowstone was reignited. Takoda realized that a young woman was holding the orb. She moved to the bow of the pirates' boat. Takoda had never seen a pirate before, but he had heard countless stories about them at the monastery. They were described as rough, unkempt, and untrustworthy, usually covered in dirt and grime. The worst stories always featured a captain with rotting teeth, a peg for a leg, and a hook for an arm.

This pirate looked nothing like that. Her gray coat and trousers were neat, perhaps even pressed. Her pale hair was covered with a bandanna, with a single braid hanging over her shoulder. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows. A network of small blue veins snaked up her pale arms.

"I am Teutar, first mate of the mighty *Meleager*." She held up the light and peered at them. "So, this is what uplanders look like."

Takoda didn't respond. He wasn't sure if she was really asking them a question or not.

"Is it only you three?"

They nodded.

"Grab your gear and climb aboard," she said. "We're not usually in the business of taking stowaways, but our captain has always been the curious type. You can take up your request for safe passage with her."

The pirates maneuvered the boat next to them. Meilin stepped on first, followed by Conor and Takoda. The skiff was full, with two pirates to a seat. Takoda realized that they were all women.

Yet another thing to readjust to. In the stories he'd heard at the monastery, the pirates had always been large, bearded men.

Takoda also noticed that all the pirates had a patchwork of blue veins crisscrossing their arms. Some even spread to their necks.

"Like 'em?" Teutar asked. She flexed her arm, and the blue began to glow. Takoda then realized that they weren't veins, but instead a series of intricate, swirling tattoos. "We use special ink to make them light up when we want them to," she said. "Bet you've never seen a fancy tattoo like this aboveground, have you?"

Takoda forced himself to keep his face passive and emotionless. "Yes, very impressive." He wondered if he would have a chance to show off *his* tattoo.

Slowly, the pirates' ship came into view. He had thought that the *Tellun's Pride II* was massive, but it was nothing compared to the pirates' vessel. It contained three masts, all reaching so high that they seemed to puncture the blackness above. Cannons sat along the edge of the ship, each seemingly large enough for Takoda and Kovo to climb into, with room to spare.

"Welcome to the *Meleager*," Teutar said. The crew navigated themselves alongside the ship, where a few ropes hung from above. They attached the ropes to the skiff and were hoisted up.

Takoda tried to ignore all the eyes on him as he stepped onto the deck of the *Meleager*. He pulled the collar of his cloak tighter around his neck and moved forward.

"Where's the captain?" Teutar asked once the last of the crew had exited the skiff. "She will want to meet these three immediately."

Slowly, the group of pirates shifted and parted. A tall and wiry woman stepped from the crowd. Like the others, her arms and legs were covered in blue tattoos. But hers seemed to be alive, swirling and moving as she walked toward them. "I am Atalanta, captain of the *Meleager*." She pulled a cutlass from her side. "Who are you?" Then she frowned. "No. *What* are you?"

Teutar stepped forward. “They’re upsiders,” she said, her voice now much more quiet.

“Impossible!” the captain replied. The tattoos on her arm lit up and began to swirl furiously.

“It’s true,” Meilin said. She made a small bow toward the woman. Takoda and Conor quickly did the same. “We are from above,” Meilin continued. “We were exploring a cave when it collapsed. We’ve been stuck underground ever since.”

Technically not a lie, Takoda thought.

“And how did you come to find the Sulfur Sea?” the captain asked.

“We had a guide—a girl from Phos Astos,” Meilin replied. “But as we crossed the Arachane Fields, we became separated. With no guide to lead us, we finally decided to take to the sea, but lost our oars during an attack from a large anglerfish.”

Atalanta nodded. “Good thing you didn’t try to get into the water. They don’t like *our* flesh—the ink helps to keep them away—but I bet they would have found you plenty tasty.” The tattoos on her arms stilled and returned to their normal, dull blue. “So, what’s it like up above?” She circled them, then poked Takoda’s shoulder. “Are they all small like you?”

“We come in all sizes, shapes, and colors,” Takoda said. “We would be honored to tell you more about the land above ... perhaps over a meal?”

Atalanta laughed. “Stories for food? Hmm, not quite as profitable as gold or equipment, but I do love a good story.” She slapped him on the shoulder, almost causing Takoda’s legs to buckle. “Come. Tell me your tales. If I’m impressed, I won’t throw you overboard.” Although she was smiling when she said it, Takoda wasn’t sure if her comment was a joke or a real threat.

As they fell into step behind the captain and her first mate, Meilin grabbed Takoda’s arm. “Please tell me you have something impressive to share. Something more exciting than sitting on a hillside in blue robes and chanting.”

He smiled. “We do more than chant,” he said. “And not all of us wear blue robes. Saffron is just as popular.” He waited for Meilin to smile at

his joke. When she didn't, he said, "Don't worry. I think I have a tale that will be exciting enough for our new friends. That is, unless you would like to tell the first story. Perhaps something from Zhong, or from the war?"

Something flashed in her eyes, as if she was remembering a painful memory. "Some stories don't deserve to be celebrated."

"But it's through stories that we remember those who came before us," he said. "It's how we honor the fallen."

She shrugged. "Perhaps. But not today." She hesitated, then said, "But ask me again later, and I'll tell you my father's story. He was a great general, a noble warrior, and a wonderful father. And then maybe you'll tell me more about your parents, too?"

"It's a deal," Takoda said.

She quickly moved away from him to join Conor. When Takoda had learned of the Four Heroes of Erdas, he had only heard stories about Meilin in battle. Of how, even at such a young age, she was one of the Greencloaks' greatest warriors. He'd spent so much time thinking about his own parents, he didn't stop to consider that others—even the Heroes of Erdas—had lost loved ones during the war.

Meilin's father had paid the ultimate price. And now, so had Xanthe.

Takoda followed Atalanta, Teutar, and a small group of pirates into a windowless room. Blue orbs hung from the ceiling, casting out faint amounts of light. Even with the orbs, it took Takoda a few moments for his eyes to adjust. Then he noticed the table. This must have been where they dined. Atalanta sat down first. The rest of the crew took seats around her. She pointed to a few chairs. "Sit," she said. "You're lucky. Our cook just whipped up a batch of brinefish and mushrooms. Let's see how you uplanders do with a real Sadrean meal." Then she pointed to Takoda. "Now, where is my story?"

Takoda remained standing while the others sat down. It was how the monks in the order all told stories, and it would have felt uncomfortable to do otherwise. After thinking for a few moments, he decided to tell the story about the founder of their monastery, a great soldier who eventually tired of war, sold his possessions, and began their order. Takoda considered embellishing certain parts, especially the portion of their

founder's time as a mercenary, but quickly changed his mind. It was one thing to stretch the truth, but something else entirely to lie about it. It felt disrespectful to both himself and the founder.

As he talked, Atalanta, Teutar, and the other members of the crew cheered at all the parts of the story about war and battle, which he had expected. However, the crew became quiet and contemplative at the redemptive parts of the tale, which greatly surprised Takoda. These pirates were nothing like the stories he had heard at the monastery.

Platters of food continued to be served as he talked. Everyone, including his friends, were able to eat as much as they wanted. Takoda noticed Meilin slipping slices of meat and bread into her bag, hopefully for their spirit animals.

Once Takoda finished his story, he sat down and loaded food onto his own plate. After eating nothing but rockweed for the past few days, the dried, leathery fish and slimy mushrooms tasted like the best of Niloan desserts. He ate quickly and asked for a second plate.

Meilin leaned into Takoda. "Eat fast," she whispered. "We don't have much time." Then she nodded toward Conor. His forehead was covered in sweat. He had only eaten half of his food, and was now staring at the wall.

"He needs to rest," Takoda said. "Perhaps Jhi—"

"There isn't much more she can do for him," Meilin said. "Stopping the Wyrms is the only way to save him now."

Takoda quickly ate a few pieces of fish from his second plate, then slipped the rest of the food into his pockets. "Thank you, Captain," he said. "The meal was excellent."

"As was the story," she said. She stabbed a piece of fish with her knife. "Perhaps now you all will tell me the real reason you were adrift on the Sulfur Sea," she said before popping the fish into her mouth.

The room went quiet as the pirates heard this. Every head turned, focused on the three uplanders.

Meilin slowly pushed her plate away. "You're correct. We didn't travel this way by chance. We came in search of the Evertree."

A few of the pirates began to murmur, but Atalanta motioned for them to be quiet. "I assumed as much," she said. "Congratulations on

surviving the Arachane Fields and the Sulfur Sea. I applaud your bravery. A lesser group would have turned back.”

“So will you take us there?” Takoda asked.

Atalanta shook her head. “My friends, there is no profit in that. Only death.”

“But surely you have encountered the Many,” Meilin said. “The Evertree is sick, and the Wyrms are growing stronger with each passing moment. If we don’t find a way to defeat it, both of our worlds will be destroyed.” She looked at each of the pirates at the table. “Phos Astos has fallen. For all we know, you may be the last of your people.”

Atalanta sat back in her chair. “What proof do you have that this is true?”

“We were there,” Takoda said. “They fought bravely, but fell quickly. In less than an hour, the city was completely overwhelmed by the Many.”

The captain let out a long sigh. “And you say this is all tied to the Evertree?”

Teutar leaned toward Atalanta and banged her fist against the table. “You surely can’t be considering taking them—”

“The last time I checked, I was the captain of this vessel. Not you or anyone else.” Atalanta rose from her seat. “Come. Enough talk of this for today. You should rest. We will discuss what to do with you tomorrow.”

Meilin and Takoda quickly stood from their seats, while Conor struggled to push himself away from the table.

“What’s wrong with this one?” one of the pirates asked, walking toward Conor. She took a swig of her drink and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Ate too much fish?”

Takoda rushed around the table to help Conor, but the pirate had already reached him. She took him by the arm and easily yanked him to his feet. Then she dropped her mug and stumbled away from him. “He’s been infected!”

Takoda stepped between Conor and the pirate.

Meilin joined him a second later. “He’s fine,” she said.

“You brought one of the infected onto my ship?” Atalanta yelled. Her tattoos swirled over her skin, casting the entire room in an ethereal blue

glow. “You must kill him. Now.”

“Not going to happen,” Meilin said, tightening her grip on her quarterstaff.

“Friend, I wasn’t asking,” Atalanta said. In a flash, an enormous bullfrog appeared at her side. It was easily as large as Jhi. The bullfrog flicked its tongue like a whip. It circled Meilin’s staff and then yanked it away.

“You aren’t the only one with a spirit animal,” Takoda said, pulling back his cloak.

Instantly, Kovo appeared. He let out a loud, deafening roar, causing all the pirates to step backward. The ape picked up two chairs and flung them at the nearest of the crew. One was able to duck in time, but the other fell into a slump as the chair exploded against her.

“Get help!” Teutar said to one of the pirates. Then she drew her sword and advanced.

“We won’t be able to fight them all,” Takoda said.

Kovo roared again, then picked up a large wooden table and swung it like a club, taking out two more attackers. Most of the others had wisely backed up, remaining outside of Kovo’s swing.

Most ... but not all. Teutar timed her advance perfectly, ducking underneath the table and rushing toward the group. Meilin picked up a chair and blocked her thrust before it could connect. Teutar continued to cut away at the chair, slice by slice. Meilin was down to holding the leg when Takoda felt a rush of hot air beside him. Then Briggan leaped into the air, landing beside Teutar. The wolf bit into her arm, and Teutar screamed in pain, lowering her sword. That gave Meilin enough of an opening to strike. A flurry of rapid blows that were almost too fast to see sent Teutar tumbling backward into the row of pirates.

Kovo stepped between them, now holding the table like a shield.

Takoda pointed to the door behind them. It was the only way out of the room. With the pirates between them and the door, there was no way to escape ... but maybe they could force the pirates out.

“The door!” Takoda yelled. “Push them out!”

Kovo lumbered toward the ship’s crew with a menacing grin, looking more than pleased with this plan. The last pirate had just scrambled out

of the room before the enormous gorilla rammed the table into the doorway, effectively barricading it. The pirates yelled from the other side, but they couldn't get into the room—at least for the time being.

Takoda glanced at Conor as he began tying up one of the unconscious pirates with a length of rope. “Didn't know if I was going to be able to call Briggan. The bond is so weak, and my head feels really foggy. It's like everything is out of focus.” Conor paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. “I can't put him back into passive.”

“We have bigger problems than that,” Meilin said. “We're stuck in a room with no way out, and an army of pirates between us and the nearest boat.” She picked up her quarterstaff. “I hope Atalanta is the only one with a spirit animal.”

Then something very loud, and very large, rammed into the door. The table scooted back, but Kovo quickly smashed it back into place. Atalanta's bullfrog croaked from the other side, and the door didn't move again.

“I hope that frog is all right,” Takoda said, wincing.

“Speak for yourself,” Meilin said. She quickly surveyed the room. “At least the crew left some of their weapons in here before they retreated.” She placed her quarterstaff on the table, then picked up a sword that had been dropped. She tried to hand it to Takoda, but he shook his head.

“I've never used a sword before.”

“Well, there's a first time for everything,” Meilin replied. Jhi appeared a moment later in a flash of light. She looked around before finding Conor, then lumbered over to him and began licking his face.

“Jhi hasn't given up on him,” Meilin said to Takoda. She pushed the sword into his hand, and this time he took it. “And as long as he fights, so will we.”



CONFRONTING KIRAT

IT WAS STILL DARK WHEN ABEKE WOKE. SHE TOOK A FEW deep breaths and tried to slow her rapidly beating heart. She had been dreaming. She was in Okaihee with her father and sister. She and her sister had just returned from collecting water from the river when Rumfuss the Boar charged into the hut, destroying it. Abeke released Uraza. The Great Beasts squared off while she grabbed her bow and collected her arrows. Then Dinesh appeared, followed by Suka and Tellun. Her father launched a spear into the elephant's side, but that only seemed to make the animal angrier. Dinesh charged at them, but they were able to dodge the elephant's ivory tusks. They escaped from the hut, with Abeke taking the lead.

She stopped once they reached the edge of their village. That's when she noticed the black swirls on her father's and sister's foreheads. She loaded her bow and arrow and warned them to stay where they were. They charged her anyway, their eyes blank.

Then she woke up. Thankfully.

Abeke slipped out of bed and placed her bare feet on the cool floor. Then, after a few seconds of concentration, she released Uraza. Even with Uraza just a few steps from her, Abeke could hardly feel their bond. She rubbed Uraza's spotted flank and immediately felt calmer. They would find a way through this. Together.

After a few seconds, the leopard left Abeke's side and slinked toward the door.

“I’m sorry, girl,” Abeke said as Uraza pawed the wooden door. “You know I can’t be seen with you. There’s only one Uraza the Leopard, and she isn’t bonded to a serving girl.”

She pulled a few strips of bacon from her bag and tossed three to Uraza. It had been easy to pilfer the food from one of the discarded plates that Kirat had barely touched. Abeke had to struggle to hold her temper every time Kirat picked at his food and then cast it away, barely eaten. She had seen enough food wasted to last her village for an entire season. And it wasn’t just the horrible-tasting food that he had cast aside—it was desserts! Custard and cakes and honey-covered biscuits. She didn’t care how much wealth she had, she would never pass up a lemon custard.

Abeke held out another rasher of bacon for Uraza, but instead of letting it go, she used it to play tug-of-war. Uraza played along for a while, growling and grunting at her. But eventually, Uraza released the bacon, causing Abeke to fly backward into the legs of Rollan’s bed.

“Hey, some of us are trying to sleep here,” Rollan grumbled, his eyes still closed. “Watch where you’re walking, Tasha.”

Abeke took the bacon and tapped the wet end against Rollan’s ear. His eyes flashed open. “You don’t have to blame everything on Tasha,” she said.

“Yeah,” Tasha added. She tried to rise from bed, but her blanket was still twisted around her legs, causing her to tumble.

Rollan rolled his eyes. “What were you saying?”

Abeke smiled. “Well, since you’re awake, you might as well get up,” she said. “It will be light soon. You don’t want to miss breakfast.”

“Maybe we could skip,” Tasha said as she began braiding her hair. “LaReimaja is so nice, I’ll bet she would let us eat some of her leftovers.”

“I wish,” Rollan said. “Could you imagine the trouble we’d be in if Faisel walked in on us scarfing down one of those sticky buns?”

“It may be worth taking a chance, if Sealy prepares the same mush that he tried to force on us yesterday,” Tasha said. Then she started humming to herself.

Rollan sat up with a startled expression, his back as straight as Zourtzi's walls. "What are you singing?"

Tasha finished her braid. "Just something I heard LaReimaja singing to herself yesterday during her lunch, when she was trying to convince herself to try Sealy's monkey eyeball soup." She shrugged as she looked at Abeke. "Supposedly, it's a delicacy in the Kaisung Mountains."

"If I can, I'll try to retrieve some of Kirat's leftovers," Abeke said.

"No thanks," Rollan said. "I don't want a spoiled rich kid's hand-me-downs."

Tasha cleared her throat. "Um, I wouldn't mind some plums."

"Plums for one, it is." Abeke scratched Uraza's belly. The leopard stretched out, splaying her claws, and purred softly. "Hopefully I'll find some time to speak to Kirat, without his advisers or father hovering around."

"Have you figured out how you're going to get him to come along?" Rollan asked.

Abeke shook her head. "Outside of force ... I'm unsure. Do you think you could speak to Faisel's wife about it? If she's as understanding as you and Tasha claim she is, maybe she could be an ally."

Rollan rubbed his jaw. "Maybe. Faisel's hatred of Greencloaks runs deep, but LaReimaja seems more even-tempered about us. She even understands how the bond works between us and our spirit animals."

"Do you think she has a spirit animal?" Abeke asked. After Tasha and Rollan shook their heads, Abeke rose to her feet. "Well, I should get moving. Faisel wants his son's breakfast delivered early this morning. He's taking Kirat gazelle hunting with some of his guests." Abeke smiled. "Maybe that'll get Cabaro to move, and at least act like a lion. Usually he just lays there and waits for me to place his food before him."

"That doesn't surprise me. His laziness transcended even death," Rollan said. "Knowing Cabaro, he only picked you because he likes the idea of you and Uraza waiting on him hand and foot."

Uraza growled, seemingly in agreement.

"Hush, Uraza. Not you, too!" Abeke said. "I don't even know if Cabaro remembers me. I only saw him once, at the Evertree."

A scowl spread across Rollan's face. "Consider yourself lucky."

Abeke tossed the last piece of bacon to Uraza. She didn't like to see her friend like this, so angry and sullen. She knew he was cranky because he was worried about Meilin, but it was clear there was more to it.

She knelt in front of Rollan. "I wasn't with you when Tarik and Lumeo fell. I know how—"

Rollan fiercely shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand." She patted his hand. "But if you do, you know you can."

He looked at the floor for a long time, not speaking. Finally, he nodded, mumbled an acknowledgment of Abeke's comment, then walked to the window.

Tasha cleared her throat again. "So, how about that breakfast?"

"There's one other option we should talk about before we leave," Rollan said, still staring out the window. "Maybe we *shouldn't* try to take Kirat."

"Zerif will eventually come for him," Abeke said.

"But can he *get* to him?" Rollan asked, turning around to face her. "You've both seen how protected this castle is. If Zourtzi was strong enough to keep the Conquerors at bay during the war, then perhaps it could keep Zerif out, too. It's at least worth considering." Rollan glanced at Tasha. "And maybe Kirat's not the only one who should remain."

Tasha's hands balled into fists. "You want me to stay here?" she asked, her voice rising. "I know I'm a little clumsy, but I deserve a chance to fight for Erdas, like you and Abeke."

"The best thing you can do for Erdas is to keep Ninani safe," Rollan said. "And that might mean staying here. I'm sure if we explained it to LaReimaja, she would find a way to keep you within the fortress."

"And what about you and Abeke?" Tasha demanded. "Will you remain in Zourtzi as well?"

"We can't," Rollan said. "But perhaps, when Dante gets well he can stay with you and—"

"Enough," Abeke said. "None of us are staying here." Abeke moved to the center of the room and crossed her arms. Uraza stood beside her. She didn't want to come across as taking over—they were a team, and

everyone deserved to have a say. But she also knew that she had to keep them focused on their mission. She looked squarely at Rollan. “I may not know Cabaro, but I know Zerif. I’ve seen his methods up close. Trust me, he will come, and he will take Cabaro and any other spirit animal he can find.”

Rollan nodded. “Fair enough.” After Tasha remained stone-faced on the other side of the room, he added, “It was only a suggestion, Tasha. I just want you to be safe.”

“The next time you want to volunteer someone to hide from a fight, start with yourself first,” Tasha said.

Rollan sighed as Tasha yanked open the door and marched out of the room. “And I thought Meilin was a handful,” he muttered.

“Come, my friend,” Abeke said. She flexed her arm, and Uraza disappeared. “Let’s get breakfast.”



Abeke only had a few moments to swallow down her food before she had to rush to gather Kirat and Cabaro’s meals. As their primary server, she was solely responsible for delivering breakfast and lunch to Kirat’s personal dining room. She quickly loaded the food onto a cart and wheeled it through the halls. She knew she was running late, and prepared herself to be scolded by Kirat and whomever else was in attendance. The bell in the northern tower chimed just as she arrived at the room.

It was empty.

Surely Kirat hadn’t left before breakfast. If he had, Sealy would have stopped her from delivering the food. She went ahead and laid all the plates out on the table. She even served the three plates of raw boar for Cabaro.

Finally, Abeke exited the room and slipped down the hallway. She knew where Kirat’s personal quarters were located. Perhaps he was still there, preparing for the hunt. She wondered if a boy as spoiled as Kirat even knew how to use a bow and arrow. Or was he only used to being served his food on his father’s golden platters?

She arrived to find the door to his quarters slightly ajar. She nudged it open and peered inside. Kirat stood with his back to her, and his arm outstretched. Cabaro was sprawled on the floor in front of him.

“Come on, you stupid lion!” Kirat yelled. “I command you to enter your dormant state.”

Cabaro didn’t move.

“You can’t keep embarrassing me like this. My father will not allow it.” He rubbed his arm. “I should just starve you. Maybe then you’ll learn your place.”

Cabaro let out a loud yawn, then rolled onto his back.

Kirat picked up a pillow from his bed and hurled it at the animal. “You stupid—”

The boy stopped talking as Cabaro growled and leaped to his feet. The lion pinned the pillow between his golden paws and mouth, and ripped it in half with one long, slow pull. He growled again and took a step closer to Kirat. The boy stumbled backward, then quickly climbed onto the bed.

Abeke burst into the room. “Are you okay?”

“Who is—oh, it’s only you,” Kirat said. He held another pillow between himself and Cabaro—not that it would do any good if the lion really wanted to reach the boy. But Cabaro had already stopped his advance. The lion slowly moved toward a large blanket by the fireplace. He lay down and began grooming himself, looking at Abeke all the while.

“How do you do that?” Kirat asked. His voice was shrill, but he seemed to be genuinely curious. “Why does he respect you, and not me? I am his master.”

Abeke moved farther into the room. Perhaps now was the chance to get Kirat on her side. “From what I understand, the bond between humans and spirit animals doesn’t work like that. It’s a partnership. One does not control the other.”

“But my father says—”

“You’re the one who has called a spirit animal. Not your father,” Abeke said. She paused, letting her words sink in. “How can he guide

you on how to work with a spirit animal when he doesn't have one himself?"

Kirat slipped off the bed. Tall and lean, he looked to be a bit younger than her and Rollan. Now that Ninani's Nectar was not required for a stable bond, children as young as eleven had been calling spirit animals all on their own.

"It's comical," he said. "I'm surrounded by the smartest, richest people in Erdas, and the only person I can talk to is someone like you."

Abeke willed herself to hold her temper. Part of her wanted Cabaro to sink his teeth into the boy's flesh. Maybe that would teach *him* to learn his place.

"Perhaps you should try talking to your mother about this," Abeke said. "The other servants say that she's very wise."

"If it was up to her, she would have shipped me off to the Greencloaks as soon as Cabaro appeared."

Abeke's heart leaped. "Yes, the Greencloaks." She thought about her words carefully. She may not have another chance to talk to him. "I've heard that they are the best at helping the newly Marked in their relationships with their spirit animals." She took a step forward. Cabaro shifted but didn't move from his blanket. "I know of a Greencloak in the village. He could take you to their fortress in Greenhaven."

"My father would never let me go. He hates the Greencloaks. They meddle too much in his affairs. Slow down his business. They think they're above the laws of the land."

So does Faisel, Abeke thought. She took a deep breath. "Kirat, you just called Cabaro, one of the mightiest of the Great Beasts," she said. "At some point, you must follow your own heart."

"Perhaps I'll consider it later, after the festival." He pulled a beige linen vest over his silk shirt. "But now, I need to eat. I have to go hunting, even if that stupid animal refuses to enter his dormant state."

Abeke stepped in front of him, stopping him from reaching the door. "I don't think you should wait." She took another deep breath. She knew she was taking a risk but felt she had no choice. "You called Cabaro a few weeks ago, correct? It was a strong connection at first. But then

something happened. Something that loosened the connection between you both.”

Kirat watched her suspiciously. “It happened two days after I summoned him,” he said. “It was like my skin was ablaze. Every joint in my body locked up—I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t think.” He frowned. “My father told me to stop complaining. He said that it was part of the process of bonding with Cabaro.”

“Your father cannot speak about what he doesn’t understand,” Abeke said. “What you felt were the effects of a great sickness afflicting the Evertree. It’s dying. And once it perishes, so will the bond between humans and spirit animals.”

Kirat blinked at her. “How do you know all of this?”

Abeke pushed up her sleeve, showing the mark.

“You have a spirit animal?”

Instead of replying, Abeke released Uraza beside her. The leopard quickly surveyed the room with her violet eyes, before her gaze landed on Cabaro. He had already risen to his feet, and began circling the room.

Clearly, there was no love lost between these two.

“I am Abeke.” She patted Uraza. “And as I’m sure you already know, this is Uraza, the Great Leopard.”

Kirat’s gaze moved from Abeke to Uraza. “You’re a Greencloak,” he sneered.

“I’m not here to bring you or your family any harm,” she said. “But there’s a man who is coming to take Cabaro from you. His name is Zerif. He’s already stolen most of the Great Beasts from their rightful partners. He won’t stop until he’s collected them all.” She placed her hand on his elbow. “But if you come with me—”

Kirat flung her hand away. “Get off me,” he said, his voice rising. Cabaro’s growl had grown as well.

“Please, remain calm,” Abeke said. “You’ll only agitate Cabaro. You have to remember that the connection works both—”

“My father warned me that you all would try to steal me away,” he said. “You were one of the Greencloaks who attacked my father’s silk shop.”

“It wasn’t like that. We had to defend ourselves.”

Kirat tried to get past Abeke. “Guards! Help!” he yelled. “I’m being kidnapped!”

Abeke had no choice. She punched Kirat in the stomach, causing him to double over. As he fell to the ground, Abeke pulled her dagger from her boot. “Be quiet,” she hissed as she pressed the blade to Kirat’s throat. “All I want to do is talk.”

She glanced at Uraza. She and Cabaro were still staring each other down, but neither had engaged in battle. “Do you see your spirit animal?” she asked Kirat. “Do you understand why he isn’t fighting us? We are not your enemy. We’re only trying to—”

“What is it?” someone yelled. Abeke froze as two guards entered. “It’s another spirit animal!” the other guard yelled. “Get her!”

So much for this plan, Abeke thought as the guards moved toward them. Abeke knew she and Uraza could take them—they were slowed by heavy chain mail. But she also knew that more guards would arrive soon.

As Uraza leaped on one, Abeke ducked as the other swung a curved sword toward her. She kicked her opponent in the leg, then pushed him into the wall. Uraza had the other guard’s back against the fireplace.

More footsteps echoed from the hall outside. Abeke turned to Kirat. “You have to come with us. Now!” she yelled.

Kirat shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere with you, Greencloak.”

“You’re making a terrible mistake,” she said. “If Erdas falls, it will be on your conscience.” She ran to the door and peeked out. Abeke quickly counted at least five guards sprinting toward Kirat’s room. She slammed the door shut and bolted it.

“That’s the only way out,” Kirat said. “You’re trapped.” He started toward her, his hands raised as if he wanted to fight.

Abeke picked up a small wooden stool from his vanity and brought it over her head. “Be still,” she warned.

Kirat paused but kept his hands balled into fists. Cabaro backed away from Uraza and stood behind Kirat. “You can’t escape,” Kirat said. “The guards will eventually break down my door.”

Abeke looked at the nearest of the room’s stained-glass windows. “Then I’ll have to find a new way out.”

She hurled the stool at the window. The glass shattered everywhere, causing multicolored shards to rain across the carpeted floor and down into the courtyard below.

“No! Stop!” Kirat yelled.

“Stay back,” Abeke said, looking at his bare feet. “As pigheaded as you are, I still don’t want you to get hurt.”

Using one of his satin pillows, she pushed her way through the remaining glass to the now-open window. Abeke ignored the people pointing at her from below, assessing her situation. They were three stories up. Much too high to jump, even with Uraza’s help. But just below and to the right of her was another stained-glass window with a ledge. And then another a little below that.

She climbed onto the window frame. “Let’s go, Uraza.”

Uraza rushed beside her. Cabaro began to follow, but stopped once he noticed that Kirat was not following.

“Kirat, one day you will learn to trust your spirit animal,” Abeke said. “I only hope this lesson comes before Zerif steals him from you.”

Not waiting for a reply, she stepped out of the window and onto the narrow ledge. “Uraza, give me strength,” she murmured. Then she leaped to the next ledge. She let her legs bounce off it, using her inertia to carry her to the one below it, and then to the ground after that.

As soon as Uraza landed behind her, they took off running. There was no point in trying to blend in. Abeke had already drawn too much attention to herself. Many of the guests were wearing their riding gear in anticipation of the large hunt later that morning. They all stopped and stared at her and the dashing leopard, but none of them tried to get in her way. Up above, she heard the sentries yelling, but so far, no arrows came raining down on her and Uraza.

Abeke rushed across the courtyard and burst through another door, and only then did she stop to catch her breath. Although she wasn’t as familiar with this part of the fortress, she knew her sleeping quarters were close by. She had to find Rollan and Tasha and warn them. It was only a matter of time before the guards connected her to them.

She crept down a few silent hallways, and slowly, pieces of art began to look familiar. She was close. She had to be. Glancing behind her, she

turned the corner and entered the hallway that she believed would finally lead her to Rollan and Tasha.

Then she froze. A sea of arrows was pointed directly at her.

“You’re full of surprises,” Faisel said as he stood behind the wall of guards. “Unlike my son, I’m sure you’ve mastered the art of calling your spirit animal into its dormant state.”

Abeke swallowed hard. Heat flashed underneath her skin as Uraza returned to the black tattoo on her arm.

“Good girl.” Faisel snapped his fingers, and one of the men stepped forward. “Throw her in the dungeon.”

A decorative graphic featuring a central, pointed, light-colored shape with a dark, bold number '13' inside. This central shape is flanked by two symmetrical, spiral-like patterns that resemble ram's horns or stylized shells, rendered in a light gray tone. Below this graphic, the title 'ON THE RUN' is written in a large, bold, black, serif font.

13

ON THE RUN

AFTER BREAKFAST, ROLLAN AND TASHA RETURNED TO their room so they could feed their spirit animals before reporting to serve LaReimaja. Rollan had swiped a few sausage patties and slices of bread while passing through the kitchen. Ninani was already swallowing down the bread, leaving the sausage for Essix. The gyrfalcon had faithfully appeared every morning of her own accord, partially for breakfast, Rollan assumed, and partially to check in. In the past, Rollan could usually call to her with his mind from afar, but he hadn't dared to try since the last bond-breaking incident.

As Rollan stared out the window, waiting for Essix, Tasha began singing again. "Stale bread, stale bread. Eat it hard or go unfed. If you ___"

"What is it with you and that song?" Rollan asked.

Tasha shrugged. "It's catchy, don't you think?"

Rollan didn't want to admit it, but it was catchy. And familiar. "Are you sure—"

He was interrupted by a squawk from outside as Essix swooped down into the window. He offered his arm to her. "Cutting it close, bird."

The falcon shook her head, and took back off.

"What is it?" Tasha asked. "Is Essix not a fan of sausage?"

Rollan dropped the food. "Something's wrong. Essix wants me to see something."

"Do you think it has something to do with Dante?" Tasha asked. "Maybe he took a turn for the worse."

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Rollan said. He braced himself against the wall. “Lock the door.”

Rollan closed his eyes and concentrated.

Nothing.

He squeezed his eyes tighter, and his hands balled into fists. He tried to forget about the smell of sausage and bread in the room. He tried to push aside thoughts of Abeke and Tasha, Meilin and Conor. And then, finally, he saw clouds and blue sky.

Essix was flying fast. Really, really fast. She must have realized that the bond would not remain stable for very long. Essix flew past the harbor and into the market in Caylif. She swooped down toward Faisel’s silk shop and landed in an open window.

From what Rollan could tell, most of the damage had been repaired. Essix looked toward the counter in the back of the shop, but a stack of crates blocked her view. The falcon lifted off the windowsill and fluttered farther inside.

Quietly, Essix crept along a bin of multicolored handkerchiefs, drawing closer to the back of the shop. She stopped once she had a clear view of the counter. The young boy who had tried to sell to them was there, talking to a man in a hood and dark robe.

Rollan didn’t think it was Dante, but he couldn’t quite tell. The way the man was turned, he couldn’t get a good look at his face.

Suddenly, the man hurled something at the boy’s chest. He struggled, then his eyes became blank as a black spiral appeared on his forehead.

The man removed his hood. Zerif.

“Now,” Zerif said, handing the boy a knife. “Go get Otto.”

The boy disappeared into the back of the store. Otto started yelling a few seconds later. “What are you doing with that—get your hands off me! How dare you!”

The boy dragged Otto to the counter. Zerif didn’t bother trying to talk to him. Taking the knife from the boy, Zerif sliced a small incision on Otto’s forehead, then pressed a squirming gray parasite to the cut. It buried itself into his skin, then quickly took effect.

“Now take me to Zourtzi,” Zerif said. He stopped and sniffed the air. “Actually, wait. I need to take care of something first.” He opened his

robe, then spun around and looked directly at Essix. A second later, Halawir the Eagle appeared. “Time to add to the collection.”

“Essix! Fly!” Rollan yelled. Or maybe he just thought it. He wasn’t sure. But the bird didn’t need any additional encouragement from Rollan. She had already taken off, though from the sound of it, Halawir was in quick pursuit.

Essix squawked, and then Rollan saw Halawir’s large dark wings and golden beak. Feathers from both birds flashed across Rollan’s eyesight.

And then Rollan was falling away, with his vision getting dimmer and dimmer, until he was back in the room at Zourtzi.

“Essix!” he yelled, stretching out his hands as his legs buckled.

Tasha caught Rollan before he completely fell to the floor. She helped him to a bed, then handed him a canteen. “Is something wrong with Essix?” she asked.

Rollan took a few deep breaths, then swallowed a sip of water. His stomach was a jumble of knots, but at least he could still feel the gyrfalcon out there.

“She’s okay, I think.” *I hope.* He loosed his collar as sweat poured down his neck. “Zerif is in Caylif. He’s already infected Otto. He’s probably on his way to the castle now.” Rollan rose to his feet. Tasha tried to steady him, but he shook his head, and she pulled away. “Abeke was right. Zerif doesn’t need an army to scale these walls. Not when he can just get Otto to hand-deliver him to Faisel.” He flung the canteen onto his bed. “So much for being impenetrable.”

“So now what do we do?”

“We find Abeke, and we talk to LaReimaja. Time to put all our cards on the table.” Rollan grabbed two daggers and Tasha picked up a broom.

She leaned it against the wall and stomped on it, breaking the broom’s head away from the handle.

“Not quite a staff, but it will have to do.”

They opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Suddenly, they heard shouting. “What’s going on?” Tasha asked. “Is it an attack? Is it Zerif?”

“It must be something else. Even he can’t make it here that quickly.” Rollan took off down the hallway, with Tasha close behind. They ran to a

window and peered outside. Abeke and Uraza were running full sprint across the courtyard. A garrison of soldiers shouted at her from a few flights above.

“They must have discovered who she was,” Tasha said. “We have to help her!”

“Abeke can take care of herself,” Rollan said. “We need to find LaReimaja.”

“But—”

“Our mission is to get Kirat and Cabaro to safety,” he said. “It’s what Abeke would want us to do.” He watched as Abeke slipped into a large wooden door. “She’ll be okay,” he said. He didn’t really believe that, but he needed Tasha to believe it for now. “We’ll be in a better position to help Abeke once we get LaReimaja on our side.”

They ran down the hallway toward her quarters. Halfway there, they encountered their first set of guards.

“They’re the ones with the Niloan girl!” one of the guards yelled. “Greencloaks! Capture them!”

“Okay, new plan,” Rollan said. “We fight our way into her room.”

The guard on the left swung his sword. Rollan easily blocked the blow with a dagger, then slashed at him. The blade brushed against the guard’s chain mail, doing no real damage. The guard swung again, but Rollan dropped to the ground and put a deep cut into the guard’s leg. The man yelled out and fumbled his sword.

Rollan turned to help Tasha, only to see her spinning through the air, the broom handle twisting in her hands. She clocked the other guard over the head, then landed softly on her feet.

A few steps away, Ninani squawked and flapped her large white wings.

“You know, you should always keep Ninani out,” Rollan said as they continued running.

They reached the corridor leading to LaReimaja’s quarters, only to find more guards standing in front of her door.

Rollan spun around and began to dash off in the other direction. He quickly skidded to a stop. Three additional guards advanced toward

them. And these were not normal guards. They were each accompanied by a spirit animal.

It was the men who had attacked them at the silk shop.

“That’s enough, knife-boy,” one of the guards finally said as he leveled a crossbow at Ninani’s chest. “Not unless you want me to put an arrow through that fancy bird.”

Rollan dropped his knife. “Call Ninani into passive form,” he said quietly.

The swan raised her wings, then disappeared with a flash of warm radiance.

“I’ll alert Lord Faisel,” one of the guards said. The others grabbed hold of Rollan and Tasha, walking them back down the hall toward the larger group.

“I can’t believe you Greencloak scum thought you could sneak into Zourtzi,” one of the guards said. He wore a series of red stripes on his shoulder. He must have been the one in charge. “If you’re lucky, Lord Faisel will kill you quickly. Otherwise, he may leave you to starve to death in his dungeon.”

Banging sounded from the other side of LaReimaja’s door. “What’s going on out there?” she yelled. “I demand that you open this door.”

“My lady, it isn’t safe,” the head guard said.

“That is for me to decide,” she replied. After a few seconds of silence, she continued. “Tyrus, open this door now. Unless you want to explain to Faisel how you and the men under your command have been taking an extra percentage of my husband’s silk profits for yourselves.”

Tyrus’s tanned face suddenly turned pale. He motioned for the guards to open the door.

LaReimaja stepped out of the room. Her eyes widened as she saw Rollan and Tasha. “What are you doing with those children?”

“They tried to kidnap your son,” Tyrus said. “They are not servants. They’re Greencloaks in disguise.”

LaReimaja’s brow furrowed. “Is this true? You’re Greencloaks?”

“Yes, but we weren’t trying to steal Kirat away,” Rollan said. “We only came to warn him about—”

“That’s not what Kirat says.” Faisel walked up the corridor, flanked by two guards. “He said that your companion attacked him.”

“She was only trying to warn him about Zerif,” Rollan said.

The guard holding Rollan shook him so hard that his teeth rattled. “Watch your mouth. You are only to speak if Lord Faisel asks you a question.”

LaReimaja kept her eyes on Rollan as she walked to her husband. “Is there any truth in what they say?”

“Of course not,” he said.

“I know you don’t approve of Greencloaks, but perhaps we should listen to them. If our son is really in danger—”

“LaReimaja, watch your tone,” Faisel warned. “Remember your place. Your allegiance is to this family now. Not anyone you left behind in Caylif.”

And suddenly, Rollan knew.

He was actually surprised it took him so long to piece it all together. There were the carpets and the song that Tasha had been singing. There was LaReimaja’s dark hair and tan skin. Her broad shoulders and strong eyes.

“Hey, not all of us Greencloaks are that bad,” Rollan said.

Faisel sighed. “Tyros, please teach our young prisoner some manners.”

The head guard grabbed Rollan by the shoulders, then slammed him into the brick wall. “Now shut up.”

Rollan’s head spun and his eyes watered. “Hey ... I bet it’s pretty dark in your ... dungeon,” he said between spurts of breath. “Can you guys at least spare a torch or a candle?”

Tyros punched him in the stomach. “Stupid Greencloak. You’re begging me to crack your skull.”

Rollan coughed and spit up part of his horrible breakfast. Then he took a deep breath and righted himself.

“What do you call a light in your native language?” Rollan asked. He bypassed Tasha’s face, her eyes wide and worried, and looked directly at LaReimaja. “Maybe ... *Lumeo*?”

The guard shook his head as he cocked his arm.

Rollan braced himself as Tyrus's fist came racing toward his face.
Then came the pain.
And then, nothing.



SEA EELS

SURELY, *ROLLAN AND ABEKE MUST BE IN A BETTER* situation than we are, Meilin thought. In the hours since they had first barricaded themselves in the room, the shouting from beyond the door had stopped. Every so often, Teutar or one of the other pirates would yell at them, reminding them that they couldn't remain in the room forever.

As much as Meilin didn't want to admit it, the pirates were right. Even with the leftover food in the room, she and Takoda would only be able to last a few more days without water. Conor didn't have nearly as long. The parasite was easily visible on his neck now, and steadily moving toward his head.

What will happen to him when the parasite finally takes hold? What happens to Takoda and me if we're stuck in this room with him?

"Has Kovo had enough to eat?" Meilin whispered to Takoda. He made a sign toward Kovo, bunching his fingers together and pressing them against each other. The Great Beast shook his head.

"He's fine," Takoda said.

"Good. So is Jhi, and Briggan, too, I think." The wolf hadn't touched the mushrooms that Conor had tried to feed him but had happily laid into a pile of the fish. "We'll need all of our strength to fight off those pirates." If they could make it to the skiff, they had a chance.

"So how much longer should we wait?" Takoda asked. He readjusted his hold on the sword. Meilin had tried to show him a few pointers—how to parry and block. With Kovo's help, he could probably hold his own against a few of the pirates. She hoped.

Before Meilin could reply, Conor sat down across from her. He'd spent most of his time in the corner, with Briggan and Jhi. But eventually, Jhi had stopped caring for him and returned to the tattoo on Meilin's hand. The panda had done all she could for now.

"Are you ready?" she asked Conor, staring into his blue eyes. Her friend was still there.

He let out a long sigh. "Meilin ..."

"No," she said. Her voice sounded weaker than she wanted it to be. "Don't you dare even say it."

Conor placed his hand on Meilin's arm. Each of his fingertips sported hard callouses. Such tough hands didn't match his soft, kind face. Had his years of carrying a crook as a shepherd hardened his fingertips, or was it the ax that he had carried into all of their battles together?

"You have a duty. Not to me, but to Erdas," he said. "Let me turn myself over. You and Takoda still have a chance to stop the Wurm."

Meilin shook her head. "But I can't—"

"Take care of Briggan for me," he said. "Just promise me that."

Meilin offered him a small, quick nod. He rose from the floor and returned to Briggan. As he whispered something to the wolf, Briggan began to whimper.

Kovo grunted, causing both Meilin and Takoda to turn to him. The ape lifted his open hands and then closed them into fists.

"Yes," Takoda said, repeating the gesture. Tears were streaming down the boy's face, but he didn't bother to wipe them away. "He is very brave." Takoda dropped his hands into his lap. "How do you ever become used to this, Meilin? To losing so many people?"

Meilin squeezed her quarterstaff. "You don't," she finally said. "It hurts, every time." She could feel tears forming in her eyes, and she willed them to stay in place. Crying wouldn't do them any good.

She rose to her feet, and Takoda did as well. She cleared her throat as she walked to the door. "We've decided to surrender," she yelled.

"How can we trust you?" someone responded. Meilin thought it was Teutar, but she wasn't sure.

"We'll call back our spirit animals," Meilin said. Then, after looking at Briggan, she added, "All except the wolf. He must remain free."

A few seconds of silence passed. “Come out. Slowly,” Teutar finally said.

Kovo pulled back the table, then disappeared onto Takoda’s neck. Meilin pulled open the door. At least twenty pirates stood outside of the mess, each carrying a weapon.

Meilin stepped out, followed by Takoda and Conor. Briggan followed, his tail between his legs, head lowered.

Teutar slipped a pair of shackles around Meilin’s wrists, while another pirate did the same with Takoda. A third pirate held the pair of shackles meant for Conor, but she seemed too afraid to approach him.

Conor jutted his hands toward her. “Go ahead,” he said. “I’m harmless.”

“Hurry and do it,” Atalanta said as she made her way through the group of pirates. Her gigantic bullfrog was still out, hopping along beside her. Briggan growled but remained in place.

“And someone put a muzzle on that beast,” Atalanta added. She stopped in front of Meilin and Takoda. “I should throw you overboard, but what profit would there be in that?”

“Please, you must take us to the Evertree,” Meilin said. More like begged. But at this point, her pride was nothing but a distant memory. “You have a spirit animal, just as we do. You must have felt your connection weaken. The bonds will only worsen, and then they will eventually break completely. But we still have time to stop it ... if you take us to the Evertree.”

“I can’t take you there. Not even if I wanted to.” Atalanta began to pace the deck. “We have noticed all these changes to our land—and not just the Many and the loosening of my bonds with Perth. The sea is different. More dangerous. Creatures that are usually docile and passive are now openly aggressive.” She looked out across the water. “The Sulfur Sea is like a moat surrounding the Evertree. The sea itself is usually enough to deter most from trying to reach it. But now there are two large eels guarding the island.”

“Xanthe, our guide, told us of three levels of protection,” Takoda said. “Could these creatures be part of that?”

Atalanta shook her head. “The wards of protection are meant to stop evil. Those eels have destroyed anything in their path—good and evil alike.” She nodded toward Conor. “We can’t be sure, but we think they carry the mark of the Many.”

“It would be a fool’s errand to even attempt to approach the island,” Teutar stated. “Those creatures have destroyed ships twice the size of the *Meleager*.”

“You must let us try,” Meilin said. “Just give us a boat and point us in the right direction.”

“You would be destroyed,” Atalanta said.

“We’re willing to take that chance,” Takoda said.

Atalanta let out a long sigh. “You all are very brave, I’ll give you that much.” She motioned to one of the pirates. “Ready a set of provisions. Food, water, weapons. Whatever we can spare.”

Teutar frowned. “Captain, are you seriously considering their request?” she asked. “Why should we give up our hard-earned food and weapons for a suicide mission? There’s no profit in this.”

“Teutar, did you not see the animal with them? It was the Great Ape warrior. The one that warned of the Wurm many eons ago.”

“That’s impossible,” Teutar replied. “That’s just a story.”

“Most stories, however fantastical, hold some version of the truth.” Atalanta looked at Takoda. “It *is* him, isn’t it?”

“His name is Kovo,” Takoda said. “He’s one of the Great Beasts of Erdas.”

Atalanta turned to Teutar again. “We won’t go with them,” she said. “But if they can truly stop the Wurm, then we must allow them to continue.” She smiled. “What use is profit at the end of the world?”

Teutar scowled but nodded. “And what of the infected one?”

Atalanta drew her sword. “There’s only one choice, I’m afraid.”

Meilin stepped to block Atalanta’s path. “Please, I beg you. Don’t do this. If we stop the Wurm, we can save him.”

“If we don’t kill him now, he will infect us all.” She nodded to a member of her crew, who picked up Meilin and pulled her out of the way.

Briggan whimpered again. “No, it’s okay,” Conor said softly. His blue eyes were crystal clear and free of tears. “It’s okay ...”

Then, suddenly, he began to convulse. Teutar pulled her sword from its sheath. “He’s changing! We must kill him now, before he fully converts.”

“No!” Meilin said. “The parasite is still at his neck. It’s something else!”

Conor’s body shook so hard that Meilin was afraid his neck was going to snap. Finally, he settled, pointing a shaky finger out to the sea. “It’s coming.”

Just then, a horn blared from the crow’s nest—one long blow, followed by two short ones in rapid succession.

“There’s something out there,” Teutar said. “Something fast.”

Atalanta snapped her fingers, and a second later someone had placed a telescoping spyglass into her hand. She extended it and looked out to the sea. She inhaled sharply. “Battle stations!”

“What about them?” Teutar asked, nodding toward Meilin and the others.

“Release them,” Atalanta commanded. “We’ll need all the help we can get.”

The pirates removed their shackles, then began to scramble. Some grabbed crossbows and arrows while others began to load the cannons.

“What is it?” Meilin asked Conor. “What’s coming?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Conor said. “But it’s big.”

Meilin looked back toward the sea. She could see ripples in the mustard-colored water as something below the surface raced toward them. Another horn sounded, and the first volley of cannonballs fired. Whatever was in the water didn’t seem at all bothered by the firepower.

“Reload,” one of the pirates yelled.

“Too late!” another screamed.

A pair of large, scaly eels breeched the surface of the water. Their snouts bore the huge black swirling marks of the parasite.

In a way, the eels reminded Meilin of the dragon kites flown in Zhong’s New Year Festival. But these creatures were nothing like a child’s toy. They let out screeching yells, each showing off a pair of

curved, sharp fangs and long, forked tongues. Yellow water dripped down their shiny skin as they arched their bodies. Glaring down on the ship, the eels seemed to focus their dark red eyes right at Meilin and Conor.

The eels let out more earsplitting screeches as they slammed their bodies into the sea, creating a tidal wave. The *Meleager* groaned as it tipped on its port side. Crates and containers snapped loose from their tie-downs and slid across the polished deck. Meilin leaped into Conor, pushing him out of the way just before a rolling cannonball collided with his legs.

He blinked, and it took a few seconds for his eyes to land on Meilin. “Oh, thanks,” he said.

“Conor, you have to focus!” Meilin said. She pointed toward a few pirates desperately holding on to the railing. “You and Takoda pull them back up,” Meilin said. “Then help with loading the cannons. I’m going to find Atalanta.”

Takoda called forth Kovo. He, Conor, and their spirit animals all raced toward the pirates hanging on to the railing, while Meilin ran toward the ship’s bow. There stood Atalanta and Teutar, their arms wrapped around the railing.

“Ready those cannons!” Atalanta barked as Meilin reached them. “One of the eels is coming back around.”

“But where’s the other one?” Teutar asked. “It must be—”

“There!” Meilin yelled, pointing to a long, muddy shadow curving toward the boat. “It’s about to hit us!”

Meilin had just enough time to brace herself against the rail before the eel rammed into the ship. Meilin flew forward, badly skinning her knee and arms, while Atalanta, Teutar, and Atalanta’s bullfrog slammed into the deck. Planks of wood splintered and cracked all around them, and one of the ship’s large masts snapped off and fell into the sea.

Meilin pulled herself up and crawled to Atalanta. She was huddled over her bullfrog.

“Is he all right?” Meilin asked.

“Perth will be fine,” she said. “Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the *Meleager*. We’re already taking on water.”

“What can we do to help?” Meilin asked.

“Can you serve as runners from the armory to the cannons?” Teutar asked. A trail of blood dripped from a cut on her forehead. “Half of our gunpowder just went overboard.”

“No,” Atalanta said. “Go to the armory but forget the powder. Grab whatever weapons you need and get off this ship.” Then she turned to Teutar. “Swing us around and open the sails. We’re going to the Evertree.”

“But we don’t stand a chance—”

“Girl, do as I say!” the captain yelled as her skin exploded in blue light. “The *Meleager* is already lost. We don’t stand a chance against those eels. If we can get them to the Evertree, perhaps they can save Sadre before—”

Another eel rammed into the ship.

Atalanta, Meilin, and Teutar fell to the deck.

Perth, Atalanta’s bullfrog, went overboard.

“No!” Atalanta yelled. She reached futilely for the space where the bullfrog had just been. She rose to her feet and peered over the edge. “I can’t see him, but I can feel him. He’s alive.”

“Can you call him back?” Meilin asked.

Atalanta shook her head, frantically scanning the water. “He’s too far away. The bonds are too weak.” She began unbuttoning her jacket.

“No, Atalanta!” Teutar said, grabbing her arm. “You can’t.”

Atalanta gave her a sad smile. “My child, he is my spirit animal. I have to try. I would sooner lose my legs than lose him.”

“But the water ... the eels,” Teutar stammered. “You’ll drown.”

“Better to die a hero than live a coward.” She removed her jacket and flung it aside. “Take care of the crew, Teutar. They’re your burden now. And when you tell my story, make sure it’s a good one.”

With that, Atalanta pulled her sword from its scabbard and leaped over the railing.

Meilin and Teutar watched silently as Atalanta dove into the water. They waited and waited.

She never resurfaced.

“I’m sorry,” Meilin said.

Meilin's voice seemed to awaken the ship's new captain. "Why are you still standing here?" Teutar demanded through clenched teeth. She shoved Meilin away from her. "Go downstairs and gather your provisions." Then Teutar cupped her hands over her mouth and yelled to the pirate steering the ship. "Open the sails and turn her around! We sail to the Evertree!"

Teutar took a flight of stairs to the bridge of the ship and began helping to spin the wheel. Meilin cast one last glance over the railing. There was still no sign of Atalanta. Teutar was the new captain of the ship.

Meilin took the stairs to the armory below and grabbed as many weapons as she could find—swords, knives, and a quarterstaff. She even found a few glowstones. She felt the ship swinging around and tried to keep her balance as the eels continued to pummel the hull.

By the time she made it back upstairs, she could tell that the ship was riding dangerously low in the water. She found Takoda and the others at a cannon, firing round after round at the eels that ran along the ship's bow. The *Meleager* was slicing through the water, but the eels were just as fast.

"Come on," she said. "We've got to go!"

"But what about the cannons?" Takoda asked.

"It's pointless," she said. "We have to abandon ship."

She led the others back to Teutar. The woman stood alone at the ship's wheel, struggling to keep the *Meleager* on course, despite blow after blow from the eels. Finally, she let go—just as the wheel began to spin uncontrollably. "The rudder broke off. I can no longer steer."

"How close are we to the Evertree?" Meilin asked.

"As close as you're going to get," Teutar said. She raced from the bridge to one of the skiffs. It was attached to a large wooden crane meant to safely lower the boat into the water. "Aim that way," she said, pointing a shaky finger out into the darkness. "The current will guide you there."

"Come with us," Meilin said. "The ship can't take much more damage."

For the first time since meeting her, Teutar smiled. "I am the captain. I cannot abandon my crew. Now get on board. I'll lower you down."

Meilin climbed aboard first, followed by the others. Kovo remained on deck. “What’s wrong with him?” Meilin asked Takoda. “Whether he likes it or not, he’s got to come with us.”

“It’s not that,” Takoda said as Kovo gently nudged Teutar out of the way. Then the large ape rose up and pushed the boat so it was dangling over the water.

Takoda leaned over the side of the boat. “Thank you, Teutar.”

“Good luck,” she replied. Then she nodded to Kovo. He let out a booming roar, then smashed the wooden crane holding the lifeboat to the ship.

Meilin’s stomach instantly flew into her mouth as they plummeted straight down. The fall seemed to take hours. Finally, they crashed into the sea with an impact that sent Meilin’s teeth rattling. A second later, something large splashed into the water beside them.

“It’s Kovo!” Conor yelled. “Pull him in.”

“I have a better idea.” Takoda closed his eyes, and Kovo disappeared from the water, materializing as a tattoo on the boy’s neck. Then, as fast as he was gone, he reappeared inside the boat.

“Row!” Meilin said. “We have to get as far away from the ship as we can. We can’t let their sacrifice be in vain.”

Everyone picked up an oar and started rowing furiously. Meilin’s hands, arms, and back screamed in pain, but she continued to paddle. Every few minutes, she cast a look back at the *Meleager* as it sank farther and farther into the sea. The boom of the ship’s cannons still rang in her ears long after they had stopped firing.

They kept rowing. And the *Meleager* kept sinking.

She thought about asking Conor if he could see any ships in the water. Any survivors. But she chose not to. She didn’t want to know the answer.

Finally, a stretch of shore appeared ahead.

“Aim for the small inlet to the left,” Meilin said. “We have to get out of the water before the eels come.”

They redoubled their efforts. Meilin put every ounce of power, anger, and fear into each stroke.

Once they reached the shore, they grabbed the packs Meilin had scavenged from the *Meleager* and stumbled out of the boat. Something

large and dark loomed before them, but it was too difficult to see without any light. Meilin tried to open her pack, but her fingers had cramped up too much for her to work the latch.

“Massage your fingers first,” Takoda said, kneeling beside her in the sand. “If you’re not careful, you could do some real damage.” He reached out to her. “Here, let me help rub your hands.”

Meilin shook her head. “In a second. First, can you light a glowstone? We need to see where we are. Something’s up ahead, but I can’t tell what it is.”

Takoda nodded, then took the pack from her. After he found the glowstone, he struck it and held it up for them to see.

The outline of a ruined city stretched before them.

“It’s ... huge,” Conor said. His voice was shaking. “I bet it’s even bigger than Phos Astos.”

Kovo grunted and pointed above. They all looked up to see the silver roots of the Evertree stretching out across the top of the cavern.

And there—high above the city and nestled in the Evertree’s roots—was a black, oozing polyp. It looked like a rotted egg, with a giant crack in its side.

Meilin took a deep breath. “The Wyrn.”



THE ATTACK

ABEKE'S CELL WAS DARK AND COLD. IT WAS ONE OF MANY in Zourtzi's dungeon, but Abeke believed she was alone. She hadn't heard any voices coming from the other cells, at least. She only recognized the sounds of rodents scurrying around the dungeon. Perhaps she should release Uraza, she thought. The leopard could use a snack.

As she sat there, Abeke found herself thinking about the last time she had been imprisoned. Shane, her friend—*former* friend—had been her captor. At the time, Abeke hadn't known that he was the Devourer. The King of Stetriol. He'd passed himself off as a helpless pawn in the war between the Conquerors and the Greencloaks, even while keeping her in chains in the brig of a ship, and later, the dungeon of a Niloan manor not so different from this one.

Even when Meilin had warned Abeke about trusting him, Abeke had chosen to put her faith in Shane. He was her friend. He cared for her. And it looked like her friendship would be rewarded, as Shane helped her to escape and returned with her to Greenhaven. She discovered too late that it was only a ruse, so he could sneak into the Greencloak stronghold and betray them from within.

Now she wondered if her instincts had failed her again. She knew she had pushed Kirat—perhaps too fast—but she had no other choice. She could only hope that Rollan and Tasha had been able to escape.

She leaped to her feet as the heavy door to the dungeon swung open. Then, just as quickly, her heart sank. Tasha was led in first, a guard on

each side of her. Abeke gasped. The guards were dragging Rollan in. He was unconscious. Or worse.

The main guard unlocked the heavy iron gate to Abeke's cell. They shoved Tasha in, pushing her into Abeke. Then they brought Rollan inside. They glanced around the bare cell, perhaps searching for something to lay him on. The cold stone floor was barely covered with hay.

Abeke struggled to her feet. "Please don't drop him," she managed to say, rushing forward. She froze as one of the guards aimed an arrow at her. She held up her hands. "I just want to help my friend."

"Give him to her," the main guard said. "Lord Faisel will want to interrogate him later. The boy can't talk if his head is splattered all across the floor."

Holding Rollan in her arms, Abeke half-dragged, half-carried him to the corner. Tasha had already begun collecting as much straw as possible to create something soft to rest his head on. Abeke laid him down and inspected him. Blood ran from his nose, and a spot on his forehead had already turned purple.

"What happened to Rollan?" Abeke asked as the guard locked the cell and left the dungeon.

Tasha ripped a piece of cloth from her skirt and started to clean Rollan's face. "He wouldn't shut up. He kept talking, even when the guards warned him to stop." She shook her head. "I have no idea why."

Abeke patted her friend's hand. "I'm so sorry," she said. She wanted to talk to him, even though she wasn't sure if he could hear her. "If I hadn't pushed Kirat about leaving, none of this would have happened." She took the cloth from Tasha and took over cleaning the dried blood from his face. "For a moment, I thought I had convinced him. Even Cabaro seemed to be on our side. Then he summoned the guards. I thought I would be able to escape, but the guards eventually surrounded me."

Tasha moved closer to Abeke. "Do you have any ideas on how we can get out of here?" she whispered. "Maybe we could somehow get to that window," she said, pointing up.

“There’s no way we could climb that high,” Abeke said, touching the cell’s walls. “But perhaps, once Rollan wakes up, he and I can boost you up there.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” Tasha said forcefully. “If we can’t get out through the window, then—as Rollan would say—we’ll have to come up with a new plan. We’ll fight our way out.”

Tasha’s braid had come undone, and wispy strands of white-blond hair lay plastered to her forehead. The girl’s eyes seemed harder than before. Tasha had grown up so much since meeting Abeke and Rollan. What happened to the shy, awkward girl who had loved reading books? Abeke wondered. Would she ever return?

“We can discuss this when Rollan wakes up,” Abeke finally responded. “And perhaps Rollan was right. Maybe we’ll be better off in Zourtzi, even if it’s in the dungeon.”

“No,” Tasha said, her eyes wide. “That’s why we were trying to get to LaReimaja. We were trying to warn her. Zerif is in Caylif. Rollan saw him through Essix’s eyes. Zerif infected Otto with one of those parasite things.”

“Then we don’t have much time,” Abeke said. She looked back at the window. “As soon as Rollan wakes, we have to get you out of here.”

“Like I said—I’m not leaving you two,” Tasha repeated. “And don’t preach to me about the mission, or protecting Erdas, or anything like that.” Tears had welled in her eyes and began spilling down her cheeks. “You and Rollan are the only people I know. The only people I have left in this world. I don’t even want to think about what might have happened to my parents—” She stopped talking as a sob escaped from her throat.

“Okay,” Abeke said softly. “We’ll figure something out.” She searched around the cell. “Maybe we can just release our spirit animals. Ninani could fly out the window. And while Uraza won’t like swimming from the castle, she could do it if she had to.” Abeke turned back to Rollan. “But we’ll wait until Rollan wakes before we decide anything.”

She squeezed his hand. *Please wake up.*

A churring sound came to the window above. Abeke looked up and smiled as a familiar face appeared. Essix. “He’s okay,” she said to the Great Beast. “We’ll take care of him.”



Abeke wasn't sure how much time had passed when she heard talking from outside the dungeon door. She nudged Tasha, who had nodded off. *Get ready, she mouthed. Faisel.*

Rollan still hadn't woken up, but Abeke couldn't take the risk of waiting for him. If she and Uraza rushed the guards as soon as they opened the cell, and if Tasha held back to protect Rollan, she figured that they had a chance.

The heavy, thick door swung open. A guard awkwardly entered the dungeon, but instead of heading toward them, he walked toward a nearby cell. No, not walked. Someone was pushing him.

A woman stood behind him, her face covered by a red cloak and hood. *Could it be one of the Redcloaks who helped us before?*

"LaReimaja!" Tasha yelled, jumping to her feet.

The woman smiled as she pushed the tip of her sword into the guard's back. "Ahmar, take his keys."

Ahmar, the servant who had been helping Abeke, entered with a ring of keys in his hand. He unlocked the empty cell and pushed the guard into it. He then bound the guard's mouth closed with a scarf. "We don't have much time, my lady," Ahmar said to LaReimaja once he had finished.

"Where are their bags?" she asked him.

"I sent one of my helpers to collect them."

"I hope it's someone you can trust." She nodded toward Abeke and Tasha. "Unlock the cell."

Ahmar did as he was instructed, and they both entered the cell. Abeke didn't know what to say to the woman. Her son favored her—he had clearly inherited his skin and long frame from her. But there was something else that felt familiar about her.

LaReimaja knelt in front of Rollan. She softly placed her sword on the ground and checked his pulse. "I am sorry," she whispered as she pulled her hood from her head. "But we don't have time for you to wake on your own." She pulled a small pouch from her belt, then poured a pinch of dried multicolored herbs into her tanned hands. Abeke covered her nose—she could smell the stench from all the way across the cell.

“Concentrated ginger and xercia,” she said. “If this won’t wake him up, nothing will.” She pulled Rollan onto her lap, cradling his head, then pressed the herbs to his nostrils. At first, nothing happened. Abeke’s heart thundered.

Suddenly, Rollan jerked awake. “What? Who—”

“Calm down, Rollan,” LaReimaja said, patting his cheeks. “Take a moment to gather yourself. You took quite a blow to the head.”

Tasha stepped forward. “How do you know his name?” she demanded. There was a coldness to her voice, something Abeke hadn’t heard from her before. “I know he never told it to you.” They had all been together when Rollan reminded Tasha not to reveal her real name, as that could compromise their ruse.

“I don’t know who *you* are,” LaReimaja said to Tasha. “But once Faisel mentioned that one of the Greencloaks had Uraza the Leopard as a spirit animal, I knew it had to be Abeke of Nilo.” She put her hand against Rollan’s forehead. “Which would make him Rollan, caller of Essix the Falcon.”

“Her name is Tasha,” Rollan said. “She called Ninani the Swan, though with the way my head is pounding, I really wish it had been Jhi. I would kill for a little magical healing right about now.”

“I heard you were a jokester,” LaReimaja said. “I can see why my brother was so close to you. So close to you all.”

Abeke moved forward. “I don’t understand. Your brother?”

Rollan grinned. “Abeke, I would like to introduce you to Reima. Tarik’s younger sister.”

“*Reima*,” the woman repeated softly. “I haven’t been called that in a very long time. Tarik gave me that nickname.”

Abeke stared at the woman. She could see it now, the similarities between her and their former guardian. “How did you know?”

“Well, I didn’t for sure,” Rollan replied as he sat up. He gingerly touched the bruise on his head. “But there were a lot of little clues, like the carpets, and the song that Tasha overheard Reima singing to force herself to eat bad food ... and Kirat’s name.”

“It was two years before Faisel realized that his son’s name was Tarik spelled backward,” LaReimaja said with a laugh. “He didn’t speak to me

for a month, but there was little he could do about it at that point.”

Essix left her perch at the window and flew into the cell, landing on Rollan’s shoulder. “Hey there, girl,” Rollan said. “I knew you could handle yourself against Halawir.” He opened his shirt, and the falcon disappeared as a tattoo on his skin. “Tarik only mentioned you once, but when he did, it was clear that he cared greatly for you,” he said as he refastened his shirt. “Tarik also mentioned that something else had happened—something that he didn’t want to talk about, even with me.”

The woman gave them a sad smile. “Our family did well for many years after Tarik left us to join the Greencloaks. Then the carpet shop fell on hard times, and my father became gravely ill.” She twisted the weathered gold ring on her finger. “Faisel was rich and had always fancied me ... and my family’s business. He proposed our union as more of a merger than a marriage. It would allow me to obtain the expensive medicine that my father desperately needed, and it would strengthen Faisel’s carpet business. Of course, it also resulted in a beautiful son. Spoiled, but beautiful.” She sighed. “But before I could marry Faisel, I had to denounce all my ties to my brother, because he was a Greencloak.” She nodded toward Ahmar, who stood just outside the cell. “Ahmar grew up with me and Tarik. He would pass news my way about my brother whenever he heard rumors in the market. It was Ahmar who told me that the Four Fallen had returned, and that Tarik had been chosen to serve as the guardian of their human partners. I was—am—so proud. It was only recently that I learned of his death.” She looked at Rollan. “How did he die?”

Rollan’s mouth fell open—maybe the first time that Abeke had seen him without a quick response. She was sure that Rollan was struggling with what to tell her. How would LaReimaja feel knowing that her brother died here in Nilo, partially because of the stubbornness and cowardice of Cabaro, her son’s spirit animal?

“He died honorably,” Abeke finally said. “A Greencloak to the end.”

“He saved my life,” Rollan added. “And now, you’re doing the same.”

Abeke tensed as footsteps echoed down the hallway. Someone was approaching.

“I retrieved their belongings,” a servant said, entering the dungeon. She lifted the cover on her tray, revealing Abeke’s pack. “But we must hurry. I told the guards at the top of the stairs that I was coming to bring food for the prisoners. I fear that they will become suspicious.”

“Then go,” LaReimaja said. She took the pack and handed it to Abeke. “We’ll find another way to get out.”

The servant nodded at LaReimaja before casting a worried look at Ahmar. She disappeared out the door.

Abeke opened the bag and pulled out the few remaining weapons. She threw a green cloak to Tasha before fastening her own around her neck. She then handed Rollan his cloak. She expected him to put it on, but instead he just held it.

Of course. Tarik’s cloak.

Abeke motioned for Tasha to follow her out of the cell. “Give him a minute,” she whispered.

“What’s going on?” Tasha asked.

“It’s Rollan’s story to tell, not mine.”

Abeke watched as Rollan spoke to LaReimaja in hushed tones. He handed her the cloak, and she took it into her arms and breathed it in. Then she slowly returned it to Rollan. He tried to push it back into her hands, but she refused. Then she took a small pendant from her neck, pressed it into Rollan’s palm, and whispered something in his ear.

Rollan and LaReimaja joined the others outside the cell. “Rollan says that you have to take my son with you,” she said, sliding her sword back in its sheath. “Is this Zerif really that dangerous?”

Tasha nodded. “His forces overthrew the imperial castle of Stetriol in a matter of minutes,” she said.

“He’s on his way to Zourtzi now,” Abeke added. “Taking Kirat away from here is the only way we can protect him and Cabaro.”

“And where will you take him? Greenhaven?”

Abeke didn’t falter. “We’ll take him somewhere safe. Somewhere that Zerif can’t reach him.”

LaReimaja looked at each of the children before letting her gaze land on Rollan. “So be it.” She walked toward the door. “Come. There’s a

secret staircase built into the west wall. That will give us the best chance of reaching Kirat's quarters unnoticed."

LaReimaja pulled the hood back over her head so that only her chin was exposed. She peeked her head out the door, then stepped into the hallway. Ahmar followed her out next, and then the others.

Once they reached the wall, she pulled back the green-and-gold tapestry to reveal what seemed to be solid brick. Abeke narrowed her eyes and looked closer—she could faintly see the pattern of a door in the brick.

"We just have to find the lever to open it," LaReimaja whispered. She began pushing on each brick on the wall. "Help me, children. Try the lower ones. Ahmar, you watch our back."

The servant nodded as he readjusted his sweaty hold on a butcher's knife. While LaReimaja seemed so confident and sure of herself, Ahmar looked like he was a few seconds away from dropping his weapon and retreating to the safety of his quarters.

"Be sure to try the ones all the way at the bottom," LaReimaja said. "The lever has to be here somewhere."

They tried every brick they could reach—some two or three times. When that plan didn't work, they tried to push the door itself. It refused to budge.

"Maybe we should turn back and try another way," Abeke said.

LaReimaja shook her head. "There is no other way. The guards' quarters are right off the main staircase. There's no way we can sneak past them."

"Wait. Up there!" Tasha yelled. She pointed all the way to the top. A small brick seemed to jut slightly out of the wall.

"He must trigger it with an arrow," LaReimaja said. "If we throw a knife—"

"I have a better idea," Tasha said. Ninani appeared beside her with a flash. Tasha picked up the swan, nearly toppling under the bird's weight, and pointed to the top of wall. "See it, Ninani?"

The swan nodded. Tasha threw her into the air, and Ninani flapped her wings and soared to the top of the wall. She struck the brick with her beak, and the door immediately receded backward.

“Good job,” Tasha said as the swan returned to her.

“We should all call our spirit animals,” Abeke said. “Best to be prepared. We won’t know what to expect at the top of the stairs.”

“I finally get Essix to go passive, and you want me to pull her right back out?” The falcon appeared in the air beside Rollan, her wings spread wide. “Hey, don’t look at me,” he said to the bird. “It was Abeke’s idea.”

They entered the stairwell and pushed the door shut behind them. LaReimaja lit one of the torches sitting in a metal sconce on the wall. The air inside the stairwell was stale and hot. Abeke immediately felt claustrophobic.

Ahmar followed LaReimaja up the stairs. “My lady,” he mumbled. “How will you get them out?”

“There is a secret exit in Faisel’s study,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “But even then, how will they get across the sea without being noticed?”

“One problem at a time.”

“But, my lady—”

“Just say what you’re really thinking, Ahmar,” LaReimaja said.

He gulped. “Aren’t you worried about what Lord Faisel will do once he discovers what you—what *we*—have done?”

She shook her head. “My old friend, thank you for all of your help. You can leave us. I won’t hold it against you. And I’ll make sure Faisel understands that I forced you to assist me.”

His face relaxed. “But, my lady, what about you?”

“The only person I love more than my brothers is my son. I will not let harm come to him, no matter the consequences to me.” She continued up the stairs. “Enough talk. Wait until we reach the top, and then return to your room,” she said.

Rollan snapped his fingers. “If you don’t mind, I’ll borrow that knife.”

Ahmar handed it to him. “Good luck.”

The staircase was long and winding, with uneven steps. They lit what torches they could, but the sconces were spaced very far apart, causing them to pass through some stretches in complete darkness.

They were almost at the top of the staircase when a loud explosion rocked the castle.

“What was that?” Tasha asked, bringing up the rear of the group. “A cannon?”

“Impossible,” LaReimaja said as she raced up the last few steps. “There isn’t a ship in Erdas that could launch a cannonball into Zourtzi’s walls. The waters surrounding us are too shallow for a ship that large.”

LaReimaja pushed open the door, causing light to spill into the stairway. “Follow me,” she said. “It’s empty.”

They ran down the hall, pausing momentarily when another cannon shook the fortress. Rollan went to a window and gasped. “Look!”

They crowded around him. Zourtzi was indeed being fired on—by its own cannons. From where they stood, they could see the cannons on two of the towers pointed at the castle’s interior walls. Below, some of the fortress’s guards shot arrows at the men manning the towers. But whenever one hit, another man would immediately take his place.

“Over there!” Tasha said, pointing.

Outside the castle, a swarm of people swam across the sea. Those closer to the castle, in the shallow part of the channel, were climbing over the man-made reefs. Animals swam and ran alongside them.

They were too far away to see if any of the attackers carried a black swirl on their forehead, but they could easily see the green cloaks around many of their shoulders.

“Are those all the Greencloaks?” Tasha asked. “There are so many.”

Abeke forced herself to look away from the swarm of Greencloaks. “It’s hard to say. I don’t know how many were in Greenhaven.” For once, Abeke was glad that Meilin and Conor were trapped underground. She didn’t know if she would have been able to fight her friends if they had been the ones storming the fortress.

“How many of the fortress guards have spirit animals?” Abeke asked LaReimaja.

“A handful,” LaReimaja replied. “But not enough to stop an army of Greencloaks.” She sighed. “Zourtzi will fall. It’s inevitable.”

“Look alive, guys,” Rollan said, turning. “We have company.”

A group of ten soldiers came barreling down the hallway, their weapons drawn. But instead of attacking, they stopped in front of the group. “We’ve been ordered by Lord Faisel to escort you and Kirat to safety,” one of them said.

“Good, let’s go,” LaReimaja said. They continued to Kirat’s room. LaReimaja flung the door open, not even bothering to knock.

Kirat stood at his closet, with Cabaro close by him. A bag was in Kirat’s hand, half full of clothes.

“Mother!” He ran to her and they embraced. “One of the guards was just here,” he said. “We have to leave.”

“I know.” She took the bag from him and threw it on the floor. “Forget the clothes. Grab whatever weapons you have.” She turned to Abeke. “You prefer a bow and arrow, yes? Kirat has a brand-new bow and a quiver full of arrows in that top drawer,” she said.

“Mother!” Kirat exclaimed. “What are you doing with these prisoners? Why are you giving her my bow? It was a gift from Father.”

“Yes. A gift you never learned to use,” she said. “Best to give it to someone who knows what she’s doing with it.”

Abeke found the bow. As she slung the strap of the quiver over her shoulder, she noticed Uraza and Cabaro circling each other.

“Play nice, Uraza,” she said.

Uraza hissed as she walked away from Cabaro. The lion growled at Ninani and Essix. Neither bird moved.

“I think they’re used to his empty threats,” Rollan said. “No lionesses to fight for you this time, Cabaro?”

The lion snarled at Rollan. He wisely backed up.

“Mother, what’s going on?” Kirat asked. “I demand that you tell me what you’re doing with these Greencloaks!” He pointed to Abeke. “Especially that one. You see what she did to my room. My window! If father knew you were—”

“Enough with the questions,” LaReimaja snapped. Then she sighed. “My son, you are spoiled. I’m sorry about that, as it’s as much my fault as anyone else’s. But today you must grow up.” She pointed to one of the guards. “You—give me one of your swords.” She took it, then pressed it

into her son's hands. "I hope you haven't forgotten everything you learned in all those dueling lessons."

Rollan picked up a staff leaning against the wall. "Better than a broomstick, right?" he asked, handing it to Tasha. "Ready?"

She spun the weapon in her hands. "Ready as I'll ever be. And what about you?"

He held a dagger in one hand, and Ahmar's knife in the other. "I'll be fine."

"I'll take the lead," Abeke said as she nocked an arrow into the bow's string. "Can we get to Faisel's study from the secret passage?"

"Yes," LaReimaja said. She turned to the guards. "Kirat, stay close to me. Guards, take up the rear."

The walls had already begun to collapse as they made their way back to the stairway. Uraza walked in front of Abeke, deftly leaping over the huge chandeliers that had fallen from the ceiling and the large marble statues that lay broken in their path. Even with a faint bond, Abeke could feel Uraza's energy coursing through her own body as she sidestepped the bits of debris that continued to fall around them.

Uraza's ears flattened as they reached the door. Abeke could hear it as well. There were voices in the stairway.

She nodded to one of the guards. With his sweat-covered forehead, he reminded her of Ahmar. "Pull it open," she said. "But slowly. I'll look inside."

As he cracked open the door, Abeke raised her bow and peeked down the passageway. A swarm of guards, guests, and Greencloaks quickly climbed up the stairs. Each bore the mark of the parasite on their foreheads. Leading the pack was Ahmar, his face now a blank canvas. Directly behind him was Dante, his arm still covered in a white bandage. Abeke wondered how Zerif had found him.

"What do you see?" one of the guards asked behind her.

Abeke waved her hand behind her, trying to get the guard to remain quiet, but it was too late. The swarm of people had heard them and were now rushing up the stairs.

"Close it!" she yelled. "We need to find another way down."

The guard slammed the door shut, while two others dragged a statue to it. They propped it against the door. “That should stop them,” the bearded one said.

Rollan shook his head. “No, it won’t.”

LaReimaja pointed to three of the guards with the end of her sword. “You three will take Kirat and the Greencloaks to Faisel’s study. Don’t use the main stairs—try the ones in the southwest corner. That will give you the best chance of making it to the bottom level unnoticed.” She looked at her son. “There is a small exit built into the floor underneath your father’s desk. Take that tunnel—it will lead you to the outside of the south wall. From there, you will have to find a way to Caylif. But I know you can do it.”

Kirat lowered his sword. “But ... you’re not coming with us?” he asked, his voice quiet as realization dawned on his face.

She shook her head. “We will remain to hold them off.”

Just then, they heard pounding from the stairwell. The door, braced by the statue, held. For now.

“Mother,” Kirat said. Tears had formed in the corners of his eyes.

“Be brave,” she said, hugging her son. “Remember, your uncle was a great warrior—his blood flows through your veins, too.” She turned to Rollan. “Tarik gave his life for yours. In return, you are now responsible for my son’s life. He’s in your care.”

Rollan nodded and gave her a small bow. “I won’t fail you.”

They took off down the hallway while LaReimaja and the remaining soldiers readied themselves. Abeke slowed down and glanced behind her once she had reached the top of the stairs at the end of the hallway. LaReimaja had positioned herself and the other guards right in front of the door—probably to try and cut down the infected as they exited. It’s exactly what Tarik would have suggested.

Abeke joined the others, who had already started down the staircase. It didn’t take Uraza’s enhanced hearing to know that there was a battle going on downstairs.

“I’m not sure how much better off we are going this way,” Tasha said. “It sounds pretty bad down there.”

“Is there another way to Faisel’s study?” Abeke asked the bearded guard.

“We could try the main stairs,” he replied. “But we would be totally exposed. Anyone fighting in the foyer would see us as soon as we started down.” He hesitated. “Maybe we should go back.”

“No,” Abeke said. “We cannot fight what is up above.”

“There are more sentries downstairs,” the youngest of the guards answered. “We have a fighting chance.” He shrugged. “At least, a better chance than ...”

He must have noticed the twisted and sad look on Kirat’s face. “I’m sorry, my lord.”

“Apologize later,” Rollan said. “Let’s go. We have to make the most of the time LaReimaja bought us.”

“Agreed,” Abeke said. “We’ll try to sneak down and get as close as we can before they notice us. We’ll engage whenever we have to.”

Abeke and Uraza moved to take the lead. The winding staircase was built like a corridor with high walls. They wouldn’t be seen by anyone downstairs until the last turn.

Suddenly, they heard footsteps rushing up the stairs. Abeke steadied her bow, ready to sink her arrow into whomever appeared. Then she gasped as the figure turned the corner.

Olvan!

He was riding his moose, which was almost too large for the small staircase. The spiral on Olvan’s forehead seemed to swirl with every step closer he came. He growled at them, and his moose matched him with a deep, guttural moan. Abeke was glad that the staircase was so steep and narrow. She was sure that the Greencloak leader would have reached them by now if he had been on foot.

“What are you waiting for?” Kirat asked. “Kill him.”

“I ... I can’t.” She glanced over her shoulder at Rollan, hoping that he would have a plan. His face had paled, and his mouth hung open.

“What should I do?” Abeke asked him.

Rollan’s eyes were glassy as he shook his head. He either couldn’t answer, or wouldn’t.

Abeke turned back around. Olvan's moose had sped up—he would be within striking distance soon. She raised her bow again and pointed her arrow at the swirl on his forehead. Would she forever be remembered as the girl who killed the great Olvan?

Abeke took a deep breath, shifted her aim, and released the arrow. It sank into Olvan's shoulder, causing him to fall off his moose. He tumbled backward down the stairs, before landing awkwardly on his arm. The moose, suddenly free of Olvan, reared back, then charged them.

Uraza sprang forward, landing right in front of the beast. She lowered herself to the ground, a deep growl in her throat. The moose lunged and tried to swipe her with his antlers, but Uraza slipped to the side and ran her claws against his flank. The moose swung again, this time catching Uraza and slamming her against the wall. She seemed dazed, but she quickly rose to her feet and took a defensive stance against the animal.

"Watch out for his hooves," Abeke said as the moose began to stomp. She tried to aim her arrow at the creature but was afraid that she would miss and hit Uraza instead.

"Kirat, ask Cabaro to help," Rollan said. "If he and Uraza work together, they can stop Olvan's moose."

Kirat shook his head. "Why should I put my animal in danger? We wouldn't be in this mess if she had shot him like I demanded."

"For crying out loud, get over yourself!" Tasha said. "If you and Cabaro are too scared to fight, Ninani and I will do so in your place. Ready, Ninani?"

But Ninani wasn't preparing to join the battle. Instead, she was standing in front of Cabaro, staring at him. The lion tried to move out of the way, but Ninani kept placing herself in front of him, her eyes boring into the lion's. Finally, Cabaro roared at Ninani. Then he shook out his mane and bounded down the stairs, taking five at a time. He landed on the moose's back and sunk his teeth into him.

The moose struggled, trying to shake off Cabaro. The lion bit down harder. Slowly, the moose sank to the ground. Cabaro released his grip and roared. The fur surrounding the lion's bite was drenched in blood.

"Tell him not to kill him!" Rollan said. "He's a friend."

“Some friend,” Kirat murmured.

The lion moved off the moose’s back, but only because Uraza had pushed him out of the way. The leopard had a few scratches from the moose’s antlers but was otherwise unharmed.

Abeke looked at Olvan as he remained still on the stairs. “Is he ... should we check—?”

“No point,” Rollan said. “There’s not much we can do for him, anyway.” He held up his dagger. “Ready?”

Abeke nodded. “Which way are we heading?” she asked the guards.

“Straight ahead and to the left,” the younger guard said.

Abeke counted to five, then ran down the stairs and took the last turn in the foyer.

It was a full-out brawl. There were only a few fortress guards remaining, with most of them lying on the floor ... or worse, infected by Zerif’s parasites.

“Don’t let the parasites touch you,” Abeke yelled as she let her first arrow fly. It landed in a Greencloak’s leg. She quickly released another, this one finding its way to her side. Abeke didn’t know this Greencloak, but that did not make the attack any less painful.

Abeke blocked a staff attack from another Greencloak. It was Errol! He had assisted in one of Abeke’s first training exercises at Greenhaven. Uraza had already jumped on Errol’s spirit animal. Uraza shook the lemur hard before flinging it against the wall. Errol momentarily paused, turning toward his animal. That gave Abeke a chance to jab an arrow into his chest, but not his heart.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as he fell to the ground.

Rollan sliced his Greencloak in the stomach as Essix picked up his lizard spirit animal. “Where’s Kirat?” he yelled, spinning around.

“There!” Abeke said, pointing. She started toward Kirat, then stumbled as she saw who was ahead. “No!”

A few steps away, Kirat fought one-on-one with Finn, their friend from North Eura. Cabaro faced off against his black wildcat. Finn, usually a pacifist, had once been one of the Greencloaks’ best warriors. And Kirat was actually holding his own against him! Kirat may have

been even better than Meilin with a sword, although Abeke would never say that to either of them.

“Can you shoot him in the shoulder?” Rollan asked. “Like you did with Olvan?”

Abeke nocked an arrow, then shook her head. “They’re moving too fast. I might hit Kirat my mistake.”

“But it’s Finn!” Rollan said. “Kirat will kill him!”

Donn, Finn’s wildcat, sunk its teeth into Cabaro’s leg. The lion whimpered, causing Kirat to falter. That gave Finn an opening, and he took it, slicing a gash into Kirat’s arm. The boy screamed but didn’t drop his sword.

Abeke raised her bow. She didn’t want to hurt Finn. He was their friend. A fellow Greencloak. But she also had to protect Kirat.

Tasha and Ninani reached Finn before Abeke could release the arrow. As Finn swung at her, Tasha arched backward, ducking his sword. She swung her staff low, striking Finn in the knees. Then she hit him across the head, knocking him unconscious.

“I could have handled it,” Kirat said as he inspected his arm.

“You’re welcome,” Tasha replied.

“Back-to-back!” Rollan yelled. “That’s the only way we’re going to get out of here.”

“There’s no way we can make it to my father’s study,” Kirat said. Blood dripped from his wound and down his arm. He was leaving a trail of it behind him.

“Then we go out the front door,” Abeke said. “Now move!”

The group slowly inched their way to the main entrance. The three guards caught back up with them and took flanking positions around the kids. Even though the guards looked to be in worse shape than Kirat, they were still fighting to protect him.

A few steps away from the door, an older Greencloak with a white beard flung himself at the group. The Greencloak flailed at them, but the guards easily pushed him away. As the man slid across the floor, Abeke tried to remember his name. It wasn’t until she saw the giant tortoise beside him that she realized it was Erlan, the librarian. Was no one safe from Zerif’s parasites?

“Get it off me!” the youngest guard yelled as he dropped his sword and began wiping at his face. But it was too late. A parasite had already made its way underneath the skin and was curling into a spiral on the guard’s forehead. Abeke looked back at Erlan and caught a glimpse of the empty vial in his hand.

“Cut it out!” one of the other guards yelled, raising his sword.

“No,” Rollan said. “It’s too late.”

The infected guard’s eyes went blank. He roared at the group, then lunged at Kirat. The bearded guard jumped in the way, blocking him.

“We’ll hold him off!” the bearded guard said as he struggled with the infected one. “Get out of here!”

They ran toward the main doors. “We’re almost there!” Rollan yelled, hurdling over a shattered wooden chair.

“And then what?” Kirat asked.

“We make a break for the sailboat,” Abeke said. “If we can make it there, we have a shot of getting off this island.”

They smashed through the doorway, pushing infected Greencloaks out of their way. As Abeke glanced behind her to see if the others had followed, she saw a streak of red out of the corner of her eye. Then two more flashed among the green cloaks and the guards’ silver chain mail.

Could it be ... ?

She searched through the crowd, and finally, she saw them.

The Redcloaks.

Farther away, a group of them fought alongside Faisel’s guards. Some had weapons, and some fought with their bare hands. Although they were few in number, they seemed to be holding their own.

“Follow me,” one of the Redcloaks said, appearing beside Abeke. “We have a boat ready.” Unlike the others, whose white masks were all fashioned in the shapes of animals, his was featureless. Abeke wasn’t sure, but she believed that he was the same one who had saved them before in Stetriol.

As they raced across the courtyard, Kirat slammed to a stop. “Father!” He pulled away from the group and took off across the battlefield.

“Come back!” Rollan yelled. He tried to grab Kirat’s arm, but just missed.

Across the way, Faisel himself was engaged in one-on-one combat with a hooded man in black.

The man turned, and Abeke gasped. Zerif.

Cabaro growled and pawed the ground before eventually following Kirat.

“You all head to the boat,” the Redcloak said. “I’ll get the boy and the lion.”

“No,” Abeke replied. “Take Tasha and Ninani to the ship. Rollan and I will get Kirat.”

Tasha shook her head. “But—”

“This is not up for discussion,” Abeke said. “Go!”

The Redcloak hesitated as he stared at her. Though Abeke couldn’t see his face, she sensed that he wanted to argue. Finally, he nodded. “We’ll wait as long as we can,” he said, his voice surprisingly soft. Then he took Tasha’s arm and led her away.

Abeke and Rollan took off across the courtyard. Uraza ran along with them, while Essix flew up above. Kirat had almost reached his father when an infected guard rammed into the boy, knocking him to the ground.

“Kirat!” Faisel screamed. He abandoned his fight and ran toward his son. With the merchant lord’s back now to him, Zerif pulled a knife from his waistband and hurled it at Faisel. Even with all the other noise in the courtyard, Abeke heard the unmistakable sound of metal settling into flesh as Faisel fell to his knees.

Essix reached Kirat before Rollan and Abeke, and began to claw at the guard’s face. Then Rollan leaped forward and sunk his dagger into the man’s chest. The guard finally fell.

Abeke helped Kirat to his feet. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine!” he said, pushing her away. “But my father ... !”

Abeke grabbed his shirt before he could rush off. “You can’t help him if you’re dead,” she said.

Faisel remained facedown on the ground. Abeke couldn’t tell if he was breathing or not.

“We must go,” she continued. “Now! Do *not* let your parents’ sacrifice be in vain.”

“Leaving so soon?”

Abeke spun around and saw that Zerif had somehow flanked them and was now blocking the way to the pier. He held an unstoppered glass vial in one hand and a throwing dagger in the other.

She put herself in front of Kirat and reached for an arrow, but her fingers slid through empty air. Her quiver was empty.

Abeke gripped her bow in her hands like a club and readied herself for Zerif’s attack.

But instead of charging forward, Zerif only smiled. He tilted the vial, and a parasite scurried out onto his hand.

“I’ve never liked you,” Zerif said. “I’m going to march you right off a cliff as soon as I have you under my control.”

Then he hurled the parasite at Abeke.

Everything moved in slow motion. Abeke readied herself to try to deflect the worm, knowing full well how improbable that would be. But before she could even swing her bow, Uraza leaped into the air—into the space between Abeke and the parasite.

“*No!*” Abeke shrieked. She dropped her bow and sprinted forward.

Uraza twisted and turned, then dropped to the ground, trying to paw the gray worm off her fur. But it was no use. It was already burying itself into her skin.

Suddenly, the leopard stopped wriggling. Her body went completely still. Then she rose slowly to her feet.

Abeke’s mind went silent, and her skin became cold. No, not cold. She was beyond feeling any type of sensation, as if her arms, her legs, her entire body had ceased to exist.

She crumpled to the ground. She could barely think. She knew she needed to do something—anything—but her mind kept reaching into the void, searching for a connection that was no longer there.

She saw Zerif in front of her. His lips were moving, but she couldn’t hear him. Her ears, like the rest of her body, refused to operate.

“Interesting,” Zerif said as Abeke was finally able to focus in on his voice. “This is even better than walking you off a cliff.” He stroked his beard. “Uraza. Kill her.”

Uraza hunched her back and growled. Still paralyzed, Abeke tried to reach out again with her mind, to find the bond between her and her spirit animal. But there was nothing, not even the faint remnants of a connection.

Their bond had been severed completely.

Uraza, please. Hear me! She searched the leopard's violet eyes. It was as if the animal had never seen her before.

And then Uraza jumped toward Abeke, claws out and teeth bared. Abeke braced herself for the impact.

Cabaro leaped over Abeke and collided with Uraza. The two cats tussled and snapped at each other as they rolled across the ground.

If not for the lion, Uraza would have ripped her apart.

"Don't hurt her!" Abeke said. The paralysis that seized her lifted somewhat, allowing her to finally control her numb body.

"So who's next?" Zerif said breezily. He had already produced another black vial. "Cabaro? Essix?"

"No one," the red-cloaked warrior said. He stood behind Abeke, with a crossbow aimed at Zerif.

"Do you think you can shoot me before I throw this?"

"Do you want to take a chance and find out?" the Redcloak replied.

Zerif smiled.

A second later, Uraza disappeared with a flash. Zerif lifted up his shirt, admiring his new tattoo.

All the air emptied out of Abeke's lungs at once.

"Move. Now!" Rollan said.

Abeke just stared at Zerif—at the image of Uraza stretched across his side. She felt someone pulling her to her feet—the Redcloak—and they somehow made their way through the fighting. She heard him yelling instructions to the other warriors in red—first on the battlefield, and then on a small skiff. But it was as if Abeke was hearing him underwater.

Her heart, her soul, was still on the battlefield, with Uraza.



REDCLOAKS

ROLLAN WAS SPEECHLESS. THEY HAD ESCAPED YET again, but their freedom had come at a terrible price. Once they made it out of the channel, the Redcloaks had taken them to their ship. There were at least twenty of them on board. Rollan caught some of their names—Howl, Worthy, and Stead, to name a few. They seemed respectful enough to give Rollan and the others their space, but now it was time for some answers.

Rollan walked over to Tasha and Kirat as they sat at the base of a flight of wooden stairs. Tasha hummed a tune to herself while rebraiding her hair. Kirat aimlessly worked a knife against a piece of wood that he must have found lying nearby. Tasha had called Ninani back into her dormant state, but Cabaro remained out on the deck. The lion scowled every time the boat hit a rough patch of sea, but he didn't move from his position. Rollan wasn't sure if he remained out to comfort Kirat, or if he was still too proud to go into his passive state.

"You should go below and have someone tend to your arm," Rollan said. Kirat had tied it off in an attempt to stop the blood flow, but the makeshift bandage was already seeped through. "We didn't rescue you just so you could die from blood loss."

"I didn't ask you to save me at all," he said. His voice was barely louder than a whisper. "I should have remained with my parents. Perhaps with my help, we could have stopped them."

"More likely, you would have ended up dead," Rollan said. "Or a slave to one of those parasites. We helped to save your life, Kirat. You

should be grateful.”

Kirat rose from the ground and jammed his knife into the wooden railing. “None of this would have happened if you hadn’t shown up!”

“You know, I’m sick and tired off all your bellyaching,” Rollan said. He got into the boy’s face and jabbed his chest. “You had a good life, Kirat. A great life. But that life is over. Your parents and those men gave their *lives* to protect you. The least you can do is honor their sacrifice.” He shook his head. “Now get downstairs and clean that wound.”

Rollan turned and began to march away.

“Wait,” Kirat said. His voice, while defiant, didn’t carry the same arrogance as usual. “Who was the man that you and my mother were talking about? Who’s Tarik?”

A wave of emotions flooded Rollan. He hoped it wasn’t apparent on his face. He couldn’t afford to break down in front of Kirat. “He was a Greencloak. One of the finest men that I have ever known.” He paused and took a deep breath to help settle his nerves. “He was also your uncle. Most of us hope to be half the Greencloak he was.” Rollan could feel the pressure building behind his eyes. He was losing it. “He ... he gave his life for me. He—”

“Rollan, it can wait until later,” Tasha said. She rose from the ground and placed her hand on Kirat’s shoulder. “Come on. I’ll help you with your wound.”

Rollan nodded at Tasha and watched them disappear below. He saw why Ninani had come to her. They both seemed to know just when someone needed a helping hand.

Rollan pulled the pendant that LaReimaja had given him from his pocket.

A bronze oval with two intersecting lines. LaReimaja had said it was the symbol of life. The pendant had been handed down from generation to generation in her family, and she wanted Rollan to give it to Kirat when he was “ready.”

Rollan had pressed LaReimaja more about this, but the woman had just smiled and said that Rollan would know.

He pocketed the pendant and moved to the other side of the ship. Abeke stood along the rail, her gaze fixated on Zourtzi. The fortress was

barely visible, but they could still see the smoke rising into the sky.

“How are you?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Empty. Lost. Alone.”

Rollan wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Her skin was like ice. “You’re not alone,” he said.

Abeke gave him a blank stare. “She was there, and then in the space of a heartbeat, she was gone. She looked at me like I was a stranger. It was as if our bond had never existed.”

“We’ll get her back,” Rollan said. “I promise.”

Abeke and Rollan turned as someone approached them. It was the head Redcloak. The one with the faceless mask. The one who had saved them, time and time again.

“Is everyone in your party okay?” he asked. He may have been speaking to them both, but Rollan noticed that he was only looking at Abeke.

“We’ll survive,” Rollan said, answering for both of them. “Now, how about explaining what’s going on here?” He crossed his arms. “We need some answers.”

“Soon,” the Redcloak said. “Be patient. We’re taking you somewhere safe.”

“Yeah, and where is that?” Rollan asked. “If you haven’t noticed, nowhere seems to be safe anymore. Zerif can get to us anywhere. In Zourtzi, in Stetriol, and even at Greenhaven.”

The Redcloak sighed. “So the rumors are true,” he said. “Greenhaven has fallen as well.” He looked out at the sea. “You should rest. There will be more battles to come.”

“At least tell us your name,” Abeke said. “You’ve saved our lives again and again.” She took a step forward. “Tell us who you are, so we can thank you properly.”

The Redcloak hesitated. “I’m called King,” he said. “I am the leader of the Redcloaks.”

Abeke offered him a slight bow. “Thank you. We are forever in your debt.”

King began to walk away, but stopped.

He slowly turned around and stared at Abeke. "I used to be known by another name." He reached behind his head and slowly unfastened his mask. "You knew me as Shane."

Rollan stumbled a step backward. It *was* Shane, but he wasn't the same as when Rollan had last faced him. His eyes were yellow, like a crocodile's.

Abeke inched forward. "You!" she hissed. "I should have known! You're somehow behind all of this, aren't you?" She pulled back her sleeve, then gasped. Rollan realized that she had tried to call Uraza, but of course the leopard was no longer here. "It doesn't matter," she said, balling her hands into fists. "I'll face you with or without Uraza."

Rollan grabbed Abeke's arm before she could swing. "Calm down," he said. "He just saved our lives."

Abeke shook Rollan off. "And do you remember the last time Shane *saved my life*? He used it as a way to sneak into Greenhaven and betray us."

"That was before," Shane said. "A lifetime ago. Much has changed ... obviously." His gaze had fallen to his feet, his yellow crocodile eyes small and sad. He let out a deep breath, then returned the mask to his face. "I know this is difficult, but I need you to trust me. To trust us," he said. "There's something you need to see. It may be the key to saving Erdas, and perhaps the key to saving Uraza as well." He took a step forward and looked out across the water. "We sail to the Place of Desolation."

Varian Johnson is the author of six novels for children and young adults, including the middle-grade capers *The Great Greene Heist* and *To Catch a Cheat*. A former structural engineer, he now lives outside of Austin, Texas, with his family and two cocker spaniels.

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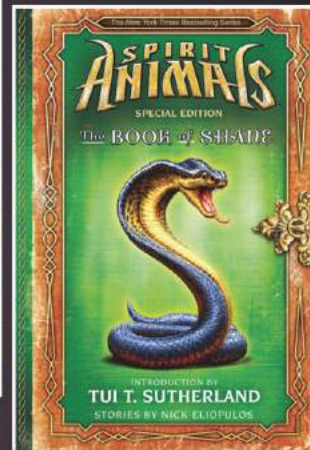
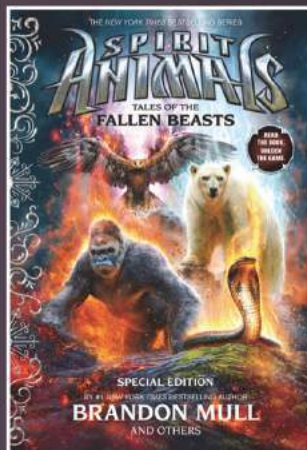
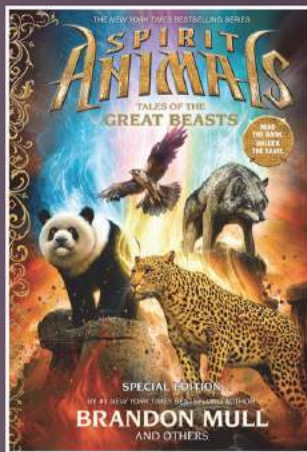
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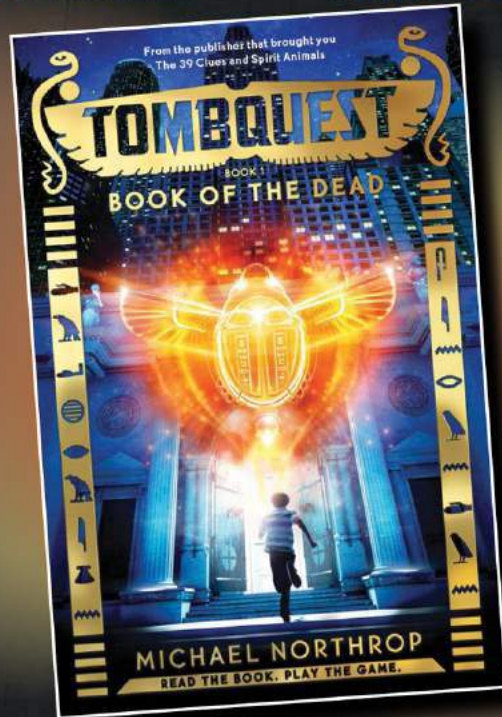
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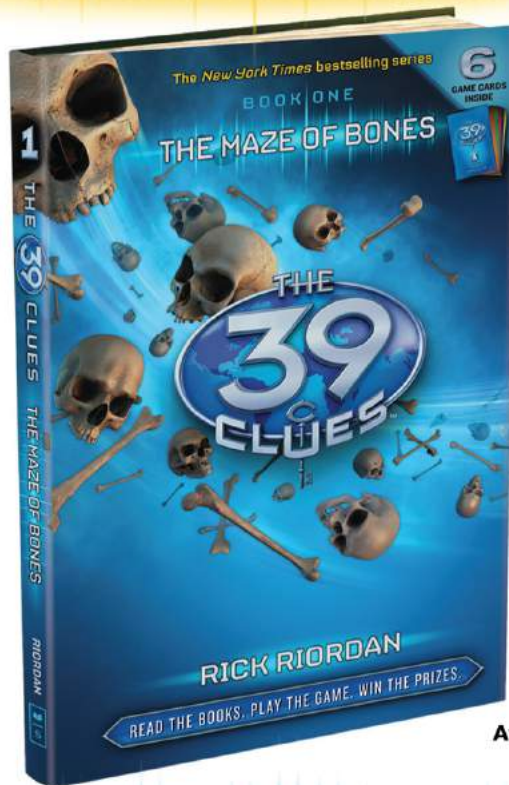
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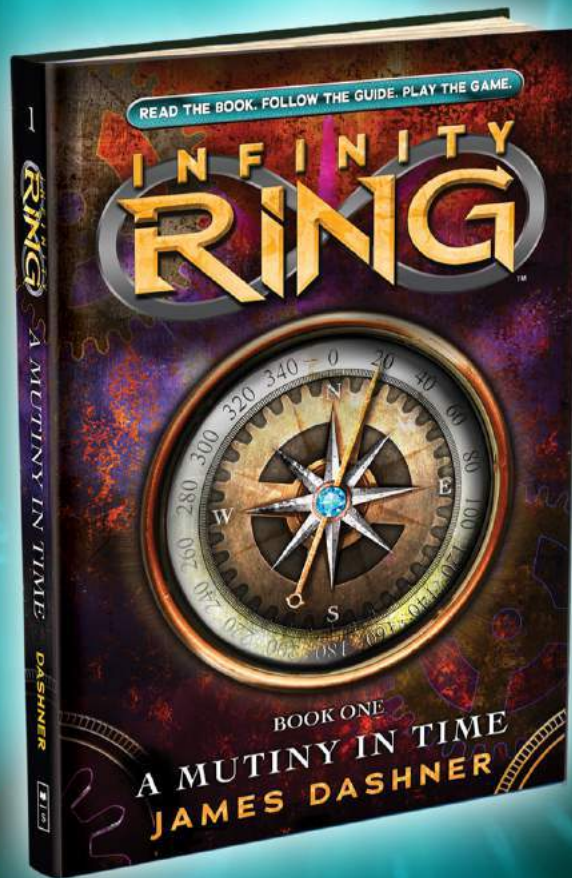


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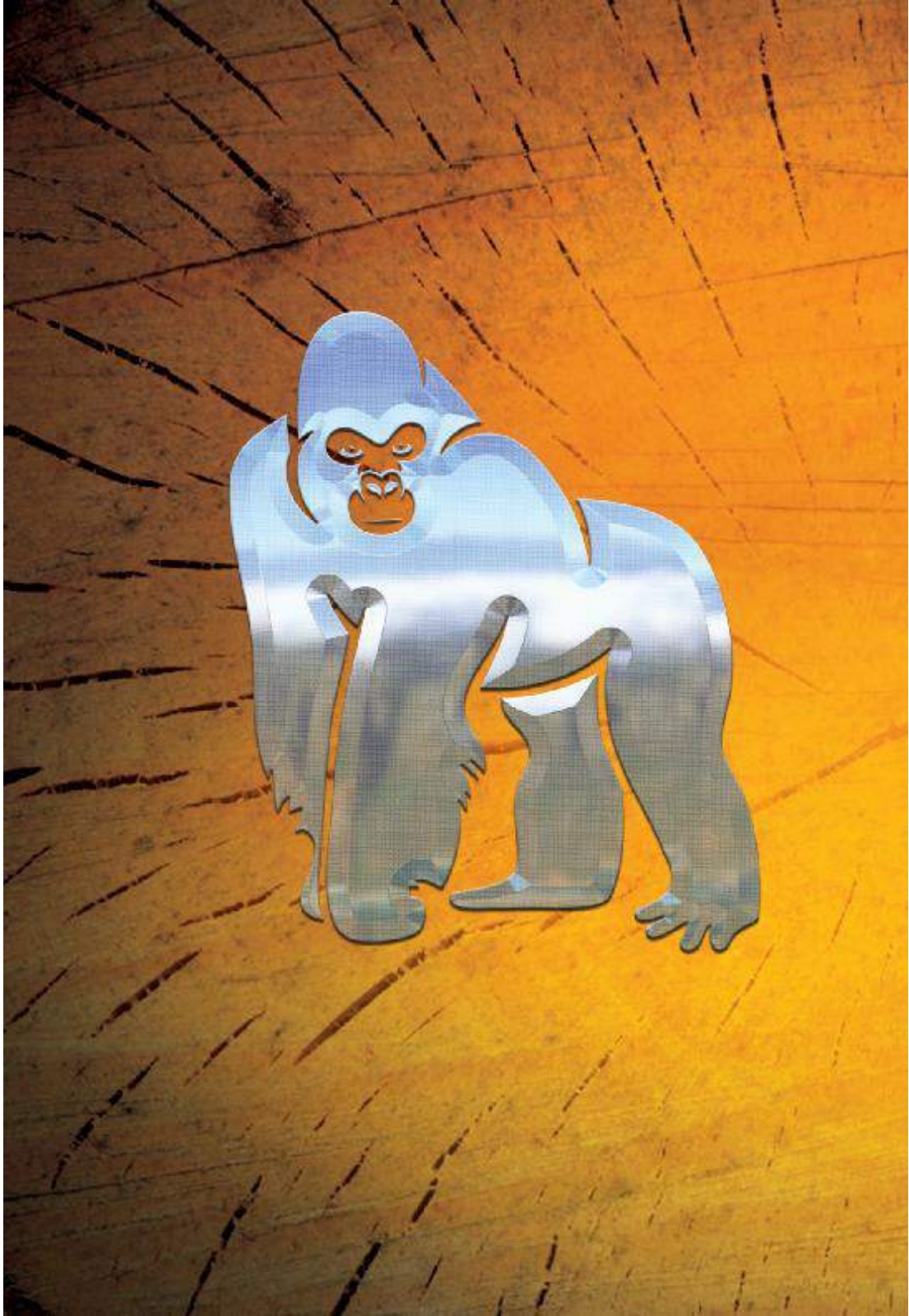
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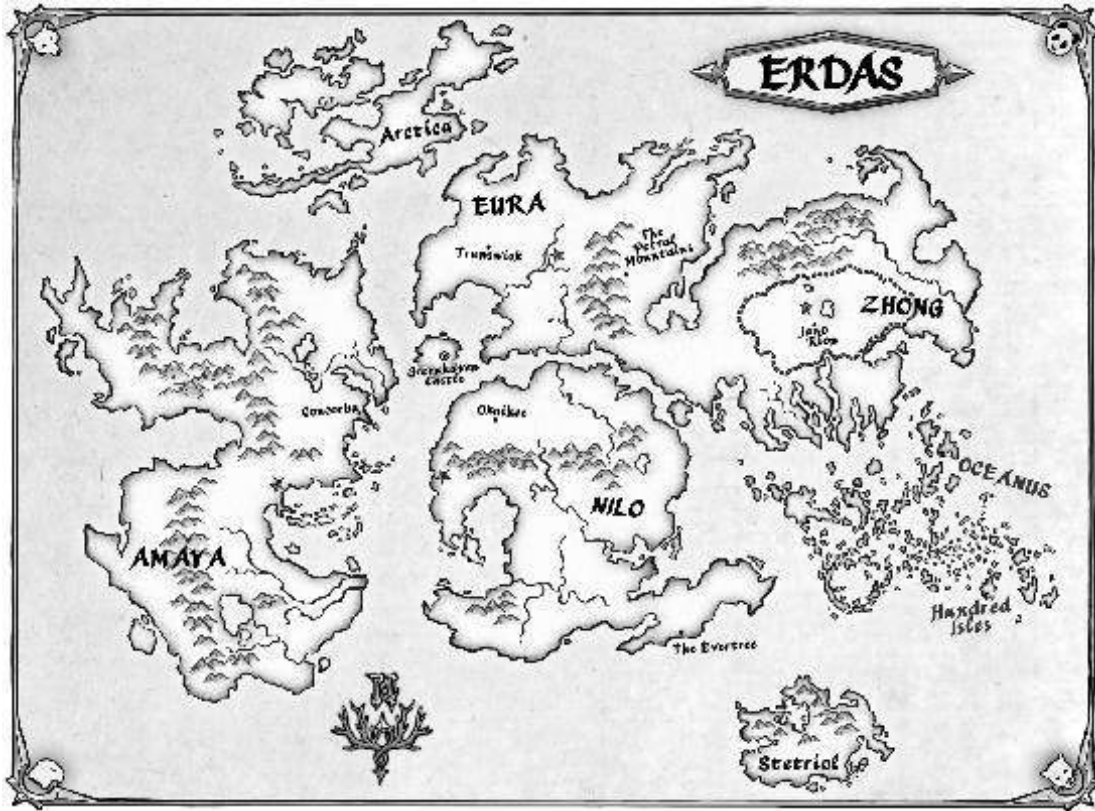


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FROM THE STARS

THE SKY WAS FALLING.

It had started seven moontides before. The elder ape of the tribe was about to commence the last feast when he spotted something in the heavens above—a small speck of light burning in the sky. But unlike the stars, this speck was moving straight toward Erdas.

This was long ago, back before Kovo even had a name.

He remembered his entire tribe stopping their eating to stare up through the dark canopy of trees, all of them thinking the same thing—

The sky was falling.

“What?” Kovo’s mother had asked, signing the question with her black gorilla hands.

The elder ape had wrinkled his gray brow and gestured with his hands. “Do not know.”

Concerned grunts moved through the tribe. It was the first time Kovo or anyone else had heard the elder ape say he did not know something. Usually such an admission would mean death—the other silverbacks in the tribe would have attacked, in order to take his place—but they, like Kovo, were transfixed by the light above.

Kovo knew their land was surrounded by a vast ocean of stars, which spun in their own paths. But even as the sky churned in its usual course, this burning piece broke the harmony, cutting a path in its own direction.

Every night Kovo's tribe gathered and watched the speck again, and every time it looked bigger and burned brighter. Soon they were able to see the speck even during the day. It became clear that this falling piece of sky was moving toward the land.

The other animals in the jungle knew of the sky falling too. Kovo had seen some boar herds in the lower brush congregating to watch the approaching speck. He heard the nervous chatter of the falcons in the east as they circled the sky in a wide arc. Kovo could not commune with other beasts, but even so, he knew the meaning of their falcon cries: This was where the burning piece of sky was to land.

It was a place Kovo knew well. A place every creature knew.

The tree.

The tree was sacred. Its roots stretched to every corner of the world. Every blade of grass, every beating heart, had sprung from it. And now the sky was plummeting toward it.

Kovo remembered wondering what would happen when the piece of sky reached the tree. A thing like this had never happened before.

The silverbacks in Kovo's tribe gathered together. One of them should go to the place where the falcons flew—to bring back news of the thing that fell. They needed a young ape who could still move quickly through the trees. Someone who could be trusted not to become lost or distracted by the creatures and sights beyond their jungle canopy. They picked Kovo.

It was a great honor. And before Kovo left, the elder ape began to sing for him, cooing into the night air. He was joined by the others, one by one, in a chorus more wonderful than anything Kovo had heard since.

Kovo's mother joined last. Her hands found his and she pressed her nose to Kovo's. To this day, he still remembered the smell of her.

Kovo left the safety of the canopy in search of the place where the sky would land. The world was a vast continent that contained jungles and dunes and mountains and snowfields, all connected together. As he traveled,

he saw other beasts moving in the same direction as him: a lion from the plains, an octopus from the sulfur delta, a serpent from the desolate bogs, even a polar bear from the high glacier rim. Usually Kovo would have tried to fight with these beasts, or they would have fought with him, but it seemed they all had a similar mission.

Kovo and the other beasts finally found themselves at the top of a high mountain covered in lush vegetation and strange greenery. There were thousands of animals, all different species, all come to bear witness. The trees were low and not good for climbing, but they were heavy-laden with fruit. Kovo did not recognize the fruits growing in this place, and so he ate nothing.

At last he reached the tree. It stood within an emptied mountain—its trunk impossibly tall. The enormous, lush branches stretched out in every direction, strong and silvery. Kovo could feel the tree's life-giving roots whispering in the rich soil beneath him. He climbed atop a large, mossy boulder and watched the falling piece of sky. From here, Kovo could see the land stretching out for a thousand miles in every direction.

By now, the piece of sky burned as large and hot as a second sun. The speck had a trail of flames behind it, as though it were leaving a tear in the very atmosphere, roaring as it hurtled straight toward the tree. The roaring reverberated through the entire forest around Kovo, and many of the watching beasts fled in terror. Kovo felt that same fear, but he did not run. The fur on his arms had a static tingle of expectation. He wanted to hold his breath.

And then it landed.

Kovo shielded his eyes as the great piece of sky crashed through the branches of the tree and plunged deep into its trunk. When it finally struck the ground, the impact was like nothing Kovo had ever conceived.

In a flicker, the trees all around him bent sideways, as if they were blades of grass flattened under Kovo's foot. The sound, if it made a sound, was so great that Kovo's ears stopped working—his head filled with a devastating thrum that threatened to crack his skull in two. The ground beneath Kovo seemed to ripple and heave, throwing him backward.

And then there was the storm.

At the moment of impact, a burst of blinding light struck Kovo—searing his eyes through his eyelids. Wind and fire enveloped the sky, everything around him coming ablaze. It was like a crack of lightning had moved right through the land.

Kovo did not remember landing—for the next moment, his whole world went black.

When Kovo woke again, it was as though waking from death. Steam rose up from the scorched ground, burning the side of his face. The sky overhead was a swirling darkness that blotted out the sun. Kovo pushed himself up on his knuckles, retching some horrible black sap that seemed to have pooled beneath him, coating his fur. He could feel his bones screaming in protest as he stirred, and he wondered how many of them had been shattered.

Kovo rose and beheld the forest around him. But there was no forest. The trees were gone. The rocks were gone. Indeed, the very ground had been turned into an enormous smoking crater.

He looked to the place where the sky had landed.

The tree was still standing—ever standing—but its trunk was twisted and scarred, torn down the middle where the sky piece had struck it.

Kovo could still feel the life of the tree moving beneath the ground, but something about it had changed.

The tree wasn't the only thing that had changed. Despite his injuries, Kovo felt somehow stronger, and his mind felt more clear. He scrambled up over the steaming rubble to the crest of the crater.

Destruction. For miles in every direction. Huge black cracks had formed in the earth, and already he could see water flooding into the gaps, dividing earth, pushing the lands apart from one another. Storms were brewing, and he knew somehow that the rest of his tribe was gone. Perhaps other creatures from farther lands had survived the impact, but Kovo's jungle was no more.

The young ape flared his nostrils, squeezing his eyes tight. He wanted to beat his chest, to roar and rage. But who could hear such a cry? He was

alone.

Kovo turned, hearing a wheezing *snuff* nearby. Rubble pushed apart and he saw the trunk of an enormous elephant burst from the earth, dripping with black sap. The beast had somehow survived, just like him. There were more sounds and soon other survivors emerged.

There were fifteen of them in all.

Like Kovo, the beasts looked different—stronger, larger than before. Kovo and the others slowly moved toward the tree in the center of the steaming crater. The thing that had fallen from the sky had burrowed deep into the earth, leaving a trail of foul black sap in its wake.

Some of the beasts were unable to make the descent, or too afraid, but Kovo had to see. He had been sent by his tribe, by the elder ape, by his mother, to witness the falling sky, and he would finish his task.

He approached the gash in the trunk of the tree. It looked so fragile, and he feared it might break under his touch. But when he grabbed hold of the smoldering bark, he could feel the tree shifting beneath his fingers—fighting back against its own destruction, forcing itself to grow anew.

The sky had plunged straight through it and deep into the ground. The hole was steep and treacherous, but Kovo felt strong and agile. Soon even the falcon and swan had given up the pursuit, but Kovo traveled on.

At last he found the bottom of the hole, deep within the roots of the tree. The space was a little bigger than the canopy where his tribe ate their meals.

The hole was so dark that Kovo could barely make out his own hand. But the silver light from the tree's roots was enough to see what he had come for. Lodged deep within the ground was something large and round.

It looked like a rock, only made of a substance Kovo had never seen before. Something strong enough to cut through the world itself.

Kovo drew in his breath. He could sense something moving beneath the surface. A tremor of life that pulsed like a heart. Something was inside, trying to get free. Kovo stepped back, staring at the thing below, and realization washed over him.

This was not sky.

This was not stone.

This was an egg.



HUNTER AND PREY

THE HOODED MAN MOVED LIKE A SHADOW BENEATH the moonlight. His skin was impossibly pale—purple veins could be seen tracing along his temple and neck, pulsing like little tendrils just beneath the flesh. The man’s eyes looked inhuman—pupils so large there was almost no white to speak of. “And these travelers,” he said, his lips stretched thin, like his patience. “Where are they now?”

“I do not know, sire!” Hazeel cried, his voice shaking. “The travelers docked for only a night to replenish supplies and get fresh water.” It was hard for Hazeel to speak on account of being suspended by his ankles over the edge of the stone pier. A pulley and rope—meant for loading and unloading ships—was looped around his feet, leaving him dangling above the water. Thirty feet below, violent white breakers smashed against the rocks along the shore. He had been hanging like this for hours and the air had turned cold with the sinking sun. “P-p-please,” he stammered. “I am only a humble harbormaster.”

“You’re more than that,” the hooded man said, tugging off one of his leather gloves. Hazeel caught a glimpse of a tattoo running the back of his hand—a spirit animal under his control. “You are the last living person to

see those I seek.” The man flashed a poisonous smile. “Whether you *continue* to be living is entirely up to your friend up there.”

Hazeel twisted his neck and stared above him—stared at the silver-furred rat who sat at the top of the pulley, chewing on the knot that kept Hazeel aloft. The rat was Hazeel’s spirit animal, Poe. His only friend. Except Poe did not belong to Hazeel anymore. The hooded man had done something to the creature, infected him with some sort of wriggling black parasite that severed Hazeel’s spirit animal bond ... and now the rat was a slave to the hooded man.

Hazeel swallowed. Even though it was cold, he felt a rivulet of sweat running down his upside-down head. He watched Poe greedily gnawing at the strands of the rope, which was already groaning under Hazeel’s weight. A few more strands and Hazeel would fall to his death.

“These travelers,” the hooded man said, “did they have spirit animals with them? A falcon and a lion and a swan?”

“I saw no animals, sire,” Hazeel said. But then he decided that his best tactic might be to tell the man what he clearly wanted to hear, so he quickly added: “But it would not surprise me! It was obvious they were hiding something. The entire crew wore red cloaks and masks that concealed their faces. And when they paid me, they used silver fronds—the currency of Zourtzi.”

The hooded man fixed his dark-dark eyes on Hazeel. “And which way did they go when they left your port?”

“They went south. Straight for the Frozen Sea.” Hazeel shook his head. “I warned them that only shipwreck awaited them in those frosty waters, but they would not listen.”

The hooded man nodded, pleased with this information. He turned toward someone behind Hazeel—one of his own crewmen—and snapped his fingers. “Prepare the ship with fresh rations. We sail into the Frozen Sea. Tonight.” The crewman, dressed in a green cloak, bowed and rushed to fulfill the orders.

Hazeel watched the crew, all of them dressed in tattered green cloaks. He felt a prickle of confusion—these were not the Greencloaks he knew.

They all had pale faces and hideous, pulsing black marks on their brows—like coiled worms buried just beneath the flesh. Perhaps they were under the hooded man’s control, like his own Poe. But when he looked at the hooded man, he saw that the man, too, had the mark. Was he also under the control of something even more powerful than himself?

Hazeel’s body lurched and twisted as another strand of the rope broke under the rat’s gnawing teeth. He closed his eyes, forcing himself not to look at the rocky shore below. “I’ve told you what you asked! Will you not release me?”

“You have set us in the right direction,” the hooded man said. “And for that, I will spare your life.” He clucked his tongue and Poe scampered immediately from the ropes and to the man’s side—as if they’d been practicing that trick their whole lives. He turned and started walking toward the gangplank of his waiting ship.

Hazeel was overcome with relief ... until he realized that the hooded man meant to leave him dangling above the water. “And what of me, sire?” he cried to the man’s receding figure. “Will you not take me with you? It could be weeks before another ship comes to this remote port.”

“You had better hope it’s sooner,” the man called over his shoulder.

“Sire!” Hazeel cried to the hooded man. “You will never find your quarry in those waters. It is a graveyard for ships. Even if you knew where you wanted to go, it would be impossible to get there without a guide. I’m sure you’ve heard tales of how in the Frozen Sea a compass’s needle never stops turning—it’s true. You will be chasing your own wake before sundown. I alone know those currents. Spare my life and take me with you. I will guide you to those you seek!”

The hooded man paused at the edge of the pier. “An interesting offer,” he said. “But I already have a guide.” He lifted up the edge of his tunic and touched a tattoo on his side that seemed to depict some sort of spotted cat. There was a flash of light, and then an enormous leopard appeared next to the man. The creature narrowed its violet eyes, licking its gleaming fangs.

Hazeel had little to show for education, but he knew enough to know what he was looking at. “Is that ... Uraza?” he said, his voice a whisper.

“The Great Beast.”

“It is indeed.” Zerif knelt down and pet the leopard, touching a spiral mark on her brow. “And she’s all mine.” He peered into the face of the beast, whose nostrils were flared. Her fangs glowed white in the dim light, and she was growling. “I have no need for your services,” the hooded man said. “Uraza is a huntress. She will lead us to her prey. And then her prey will die.”



THE FROZEN SEA

ABEKE CROUCHED IN THE CROW'S NEST, STARING OUT over the choppy surface of the water that stretched clear to the white horizon. She clutched a small obsidian stone in her hand, which she was chiseling to a razor point to create an arrowhead. One of dozens she had stowed in the pack of her quiver. The water was bitterly cold, just like the air. But neither was half so cold as she was inside. She pulled her tattered cloak around her shoulders, but even that gave little comfort. She wore the colors of a Greencloak, but what right did she have to such a title? Greencloaks had spirit animals. And Abeke had nothing.

The ship, a creaking frigate named the *Expiator*, keeled to one side, and Abeke had to grip the ropes of the crow's nest to prevent being flung into the water a hundred feet below. Beneath her, she could hear the sounds of the crew working the lines to keep the ship upright as they charted a course ever southward. She and Rollan had been traveling for several days, moving swiftly through an uncharted sea whose only reputation was for storm and shipwreck. Even now, she could see the jagged shards of floating ice that stuck from the water's surface like fifty-foot teeth, waiting to devour them. Cold wind shivered past the top of the mast, and she wondered how many ships had found their ends in these waters. And where did these waters even

lead? All they had been told was that they were being carried to a place called “the snare,” but none of the crew was willing to tell her more.

Abeke was startled from her work by the sound of someone ascending the rungs. “Mind if I join you?”

She glanced over her shoulder to see Rollan hoisting himself up onto the deck of the crow’s nest. His face was chapped from the cold, and she knew that he, like her, was unused to such weather. That he had come upon her so stealthily was not surprising, but it was distressing. If Uraza had still been with her, Abeke would have sensed his approach.

“Shouldn’t you be babysitting our new recruits?” she said, helping him up the top rung. Rollan had been tasked with keeping tabs on two newer children who had recently summoned Great Beasts, Kirat and Tasha. The thought of Rollan playing the role of Greencloak mentor almost made her smile. Quite a change from the boy who once loudly claimed to care for no one but himself. She suspected their own mentor, the late Tarik, would have shared her amusement.

“I set Kirat to swabbing the latrine,” Rollan said. “Thought it would build character.” He dug into the pockets of the fur-lined coat that the Redcloaks had given him and removed a rasher of dried shark meat. “I swiped a second helping of lunch. Thought you might be getting hungry up here.... ” But even as he said this, his eyes fell on the pile of untouched food at her feet—several days’ worth of rations.

Abeke gave a tight smile. “Not a big fan of seafood, I’m afraid.” The truth was, she hadn’t eaten in two days. She simply didn’t have an appetite. “It gives me a bad stomach.”

Abeke saw worry flash across Rollan’s face, which he quickly replaced with a forced grin. “Oh, well. More for me!” He chomped down on a strip of meat and settled in beside her, apparently unable to take the hint that she wanted to be alone.

The deck of the crow’s nest was designed for one adult, and there was hardly enough room for the two of them. Rollan sat with his back against Abeke’s, each of them staring out in a different direction.

“You haven’t seen Essix up here, have you?” he said through bites of shark meat. “She’s been acting strange for days now, swooping around in big uneven loops, high then low then high again.... I can feel her uncertainty, as if the air were making her dizzy. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’s been nipping at the Redcloaks’ grog barrels.”

He probably meant this as a joke, but Abeke couldn’t manage even a smile. “I tried bringing her into passive state, but the moment I did that, I started feeling dizzy, too. Just this morning I threw up my whole breakfast on the deck. Hence the fresh appetite.” He sighed, chuckling. “I swear that bird will be the end of me. My life would be ten times easier if I’d gotten a three-toed sloth ... or maybe a nice, slow beetle. A beetle would have been grand!”

Abeke pulled her knees tight against her chest. “At least you *have* a spirit animal,” she said quietly.

She felt Rollan take a deep breath behind her. For once, he seemed to be at a loss for a witty retort. “Wonder how much farther it is to this mysterious Redcloak base?” he asked more seriously. “Never imagined a place could be so crushingly cold. No life, hardly any fish even. Just huge chunks of jagged ice. This place makes Suka’s ice palace look positively cozy.”

Abeke nodded, smiling despite herself. What felt like a lifetime before, she and Rollan had ventured to the northernmost mountains of Eura to find the talisman of the Great Bear, Suka. But that particular talisman had been stolen by Shane, the Devourer. The very same Shane who now captained the ship they were traveling aboard. Even now, it was unclear whether they were guests or prisoners.

“Do you really think we can trust them?” Rollan said, as if reading her thoughts. “I know they saved our lives back in Nilo—more than once, even. But still. We’ve been deceived before.”

Abeke eyed the crew moving far below, all of them wearing long red cloaks and cloth masks over their faces. Each mask was marked with the image of a different animal. The masks provided some warmth from the bitter cold, but that was not why they wore them.

These “Redcloaks” wore masks to hide their faces. Every single one of them, down to the last woman and man, had a pair of inhuman eyes peering out from the folds of her or his mask. The few who had been bold enough to take their masks off around Abeke and the others revealed patches of skin that were disfigured into a twisted hash of animal and human.

Abeke still wasn’t sure what had happened to produce this strange result, but it was unnerving to say the least. Shane himself had greeted her in Nilo with the cruel yellow eyes of a reptile—the eyes of his lost spirit animal.

Perhaps that was no less than he deserved. The boy’s crocodile tears had once convinced her to lead him right into Greenhaven, where he promptly betrayed her. That Shane now wore the symbol of his deception seemed only fitting.

But thinking of Shane and his crocodile only made her think of Uraza. Abeke closed her eyes, remembering the moment when Zerif’s parasite infected her beloved spirit animal. How Uraza’s violet eyes had suddenly clouded over. And worse than that, how a part of Abeke’s own heart and soul had just as suddenly *vanished*.

Once in control of Uraza, Zerif had ordered the leopard to kill Abeke ... and Uraza had *listened*. Without a moment’s hesitation, Uraza had pounced at her, claws out. Had it not been for Cabaro intercepting the attack, Abeke would be dead. But then, how much worse could death really be from what she was already feeling?

All that would have been difficult enough for Abeke to process, but the recent discovery that the leader of the Redcloaks was none other than Shane—the Devourer who had once set out to destroy them all—was more than she could handle. She had trusted Shane once before and paid a dear price for it. And yet here she was, sailing to a secret location on a ship under his command.

But what choice did they have? With Zerif’s army of infected Greencloaks hunting down the other Great Beasts, they had nowhere else to turn.

“I don’t know if we can trust him,” Abeke said at last. “But when I look at him now ... some part of me thinks he really has changed.”

“Oh, he’s changed all right—into a lizard-eyed freak. If anything, he looks more like the Devourer than ever before. Not exactly reassuring.”

“Still,” Abeke said. “If he wanted us dead, he could have just let Zerif do the job. He needs us for something. It’s just a question of what.” She shivered, pulling her cloak tighter. “Wherever he’s taking us, let’s hope we get there before we freeze to death.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a faint cry of a bird. “It’s Essix!” Rollan said, climbing to his feet. “She sees something.” The cry had come from far ahead, somewhere deep in the clouds. Abeke watched as Rollan closed his eyes and put a hand to his temple—trying to *see* through his spirit animal’s eyes. Abeke had seen him do this many times before, but only now did it fill her with a pang of jealousy. A moment later he stepped back, blinking. He had the slack-jawed look of someone who had just beheld a wonder beyond his own imagining.

“What is it?” Abeke said, standing. “Did you see the Place of Desolation?”

“One thing’s for sure,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “We’re not going to freeze to death.”



THE MOLTEN RUINS

GROWING UP IN AMAYA AS HE HAD, ROLLAN HAD certainly heard stories about volcanoes—tales of long-dead kingdoms now buried under blankets of petrified ash. But none of those stories had captured just how awesome it was to behold an *actual* live volcano. Rollan had seen it first through Essix’s eyes, and then only for a brief moment—a glowing red cauldron spewing miles of steam into the cold air. His falcon had returned to him shortly after, and she seemed grateful for the chance to rest herself on the edge of the mast.

It was nearly an hour before the *Expiator* came within view of the steaming black mountain that towered over the horizon. Having only seen it from Essix’s eyes overhead, Rollan was unprepared for its size. The volcano was *massive*—large enough to hold half of his home city of Concorba inside of it.

“I’ll say one thing for our friend Shane,” he muttered to Abeke. “He knows how to make an impression.”

“Land ho!” a female Redcloak with a bird mask called, ringing a bell on the ship’s fore. “All hands to the main deck!”

Rollan and Abeke went belowdecks to find Kirat and Tasha and gather what few belongings they had managed to bring with them when they fled

Zerif's army back in Nilo. They came upon Tasha practicing the defensive forms that Rollan had taught her, a large staff gripped tightly in her hands. In the past few weeks she had shown herself to be a dedicated student ... though it had quickly become apparent that stationary fighting positions were best suited for the girl. Tasha couldn't seem to walk ten steps without tripping over her own feet.

Kirat, meanwhile, was caught in yet another battle of wills with his Great Beast. Proud, fierce Cabaro was apparently as prone to seasickness as Uraza had been, and had hidden himself under Kirat's bunk, refusing to leave even for meals.

"I'm trying to *help you*, you overgrown house cat!" Kirat said, hands in the air. "If you go passive, I can escort you down to land myself. Everybody wins!"

In reply, the lion bared his white teeth and growled.

Kirat showed his own teeth, which were chattering in the cold. "When you die down there, I think I'll have you turned into a nice fur coat. At least then you'll be of some use to me."

Rollan put a hand on Kirat's shoulder. "Leave him. He'll come out when he's ready. I know from experience there's no use commanding a stubborn spirit animal. They're Great Beasts. Not servants."

As he said this, he couldn't help but glance at Essix, who had perched herself on his right arm, refusing to move from that spot. The gyrfalcon gripped him so tightly that he could feel it through his thick leather gauntlet. Rollan suspected that whatever strange disruption the falcon had felt in the air had made her wary of flying. He reached up and scratched her under the beak, and surprisingly she let him. Whatever it was about this place that made her so uncomfortable, he hoped it faded soon. He didn't want to find himself in a fight without Essix at his side.

Their packs gathered, Rollan and the others were summoned by a Redcloak called Stead who wore the mask of a ram.

"King has gone ahead. You four are to follow me," the boy said, in the tone of one who was used to having his orders obeyed. "Watch your step on

the gangplank. If you fall into the water, you'll be frozen before we can fish you out."

The base of the volcano was encased in the thick shell of an enormous icy glacier. Rivulets of steaming red lava snaked through the ice, filling the air with a damp, sulfurous odor. The *Expiator* had been docked at a pier that looked to have been chiseled out of the side of the glacier. Small huts and glistening bridges were similarly cut from the ice. Rollan and the others shuffled down the gangplank and onto the glacier's surface. Unlike the snow up north, the ground here was hard and unyielding—the sort that would hurt to fall on.

"Careful," Rollan said as Tasha rushed down the platform right behind him. He heard a cry as the girl slipped on her *very first* step on the ice and landed hard on her rump—her pack spilling out behind her. "Maybe we can fashion you a sled," Rollan said, reaching down to help her to her feet. "Ninani can pull it."

Tasha ignored his extended hand. She swung her foot around, sweeping Rollan's leg from behind and sending him crashing onto the ice beside her. He felt his face grow hot as every Redcloak watching burst into laughter. "On the bright side," he said, wincing as he pulled himself back up, "at least I know you've been practicing."

Stead led them up some narrow steps that curved around the edge of the volcano, providing them an overhead view of the camp. Glancing below, Rollan saw that everyone was wearing red cloaks—except for a small pack of kids just a bit younger than him. There were maybe a half dozen of them, all wearing sealskin coats.

"What's the story with them?" Rollan said, nodding at the group. "You ran out of red fabric?"

"I'm surprised you haven't guessed," Stead said, his voice heavy. "Those are the other victims of Zerif's parasites. Kids like you, who summoned Great Beasts as spirit animals."

Squinting down, Rollan realized that he recognized the face of Anda among the other kids—the Amayan boy who had summoned Tellun. But how had he ended up here? The last time Rollan and Abeke had seen Anda

was in Greenhaven. Olvan had been preparing to send him back home to Amaya.

“Zerif tracked them all down and stole their spirit animals,” Stead said, “sometimes destroying their homes and families in the process. They’re here to take back what was stolen from them.” It was all Rollan could do not to sneak a glance at Abeke, who undoubtedly recognized her own pain in their hollow faces.

The children were all working diligently, helping to dig trenches in the ice, cooking food, mending boots. The idea that these Redcloaks had managed to gather the other Great Beast summoners—while he and Abeke had failed—irked Rollan. “Must be nice to have your own personal army of servants,” he muttered.

Stead turned and regarded Rollan through his strange white mask. “They aren’t our servants,” he said finally. “They’re here because King rescued them. He wants to help.” Then he turned and began scaling the path again.

“What we really need is an army of fighters,” Stead continued as he walked. “But it’s too late to train these children. Especially without their spirit animals.” He cocked his head to one side, studying Rollan. “Or maybe you could help with that? I hear you have a gift for mentoring young warriors.”

Rollan couldn’t tell if he was being mocked or not, but the proposition horrified him. “Not me,” he said, nodding to Kirat and Tasha. “I’ve paid my dues with these two, and that was plenty. Trying to teach Kirat anything is like trying to get Cabaro into passive state. Impossible.”

Kirat scowled. “Maybe if you actually knew what you were doing, I would listen.”

Rollan looked at the boy, who was the very picture of smugness. That this boy was the nephew of Rollan’s old mentor, Tarik, was almost impossible to believe. He thought of the amulet resting at the bottom of his pack. The amulet that Kirat’s mother had given him. It was Rollan’s job to hold on to it until Kirat had matured enough to follow in his uncle’s footsteps. At the rate things were presently going, Rollan would die of old age before that happened.

“Think you can do better?” Rollan said, nodding to the children working below. “Be my guest.”

He had meant it as a joke, but Kirat seemed to consider the idea. The boy folded his arms. “Maybe I will.”

“Later,” Stead said, interrupting the contest of wills. “Right now we should eat, before King comes. He’s going to want to talk to you.”

“King ... ?” Abeke said. “That’s what you call Shane?”

Stead nodded. “He tells us not to, but ... old habits die hard.”

Rollan looked at Abeke, trying to read her face. The Shane they knew would probably have forced people to call him king on punishment of death. It was hard to imagine him as anything but a ruthless leader. “Stay close,” he whispered as they followed Stead up the snowy path. “And keep your bow handy.”

Rollan and the others soon found themselves sitting in an alcove carved into the side of the mountain. A small group of Redcloaks joined them there, but stood aloof several feet away. It was as if they were afraid of Rollan and Abeke. Afraid ... or ashamed.

Stead removed his mask to reveal a pair of horizontal pupils in his eyes—just like a ram.

The other Redcloaks appeared to be from all different parts of the world. As they slowly removed their masks, Rollan saw a girl with the flitting black eyes of a bird, a man with pinhole pupils like a lizard, and another with sad, doglike eyes and a rash of long fur that crept up his neck. It was all Rollan could do not to stare.

Though the air outside was frigid, the temperature in the alcove was comfortable. A vein of red lava flowed through a man-made channel that ran around the perimeter, warming the ground just enough so Rollan could breathe without his teeth chattering. The Redcloaks outside were busy tending to an enormous cauldron of stew that was hanging over a pool of bubbling lava.

Stead was watching them, his strange eyes moving between the figures. Many of their masks were off now. It seemed they were preparing to eat. “This is Shadow,” Stead said, gesturing to a woman with catlike eyes.

“And these”—he nodded toward two boys who had kept their masks on—some kind of wildcat and a bird with a long straight beak—“are Worthy and Jolt. Though you may already know them by different names.”

The boys slowly removed their masks, and Rollan’s mouth fell open. Beside him, Abeke sucked in a hiss of air. Standing before them were none other than Devin Trunswick and Karmo—two of the young Conquerors they’d beaten back in Eura while searching for Rumfuss’s talisman.

In the handful of brief and unpleasant encounters he’d had with Devin, Rollan had never once seen the boy without a sneer. Now the Euran noble’s catlike eyes seemed weighted to the ground—like he was ashamed to be seen.

Karmo’s own wide brown eyes were on Abeke, who glared right back at him.

There was a great deal of glaring back and forth, in fact. Stead coughed uncomfortably.

It was Devin who broke the silence. “So ... ” he said, his eyes finally rising. “How’s Conor?”

Rollan barked out a hard laugh and shook his head. “If this is your idea of a joke,” he said, “I’m not looking forward to the punch line.”

“It’s no joke,” Stead said, sighing. “King suspected you’d be mistrustful. I don’t blame you. But know this—Worthy and Jolt, like all of us, are here to atone for their crimes.”

Rollan decided to take the boy at his word ... at least for now. “So you all get to pick secret names?” he said. “Can I request that people start calling me Handsome?”

“Most names are based on our spirit animals,” said another Redcloak woman with black, hungry eyes that reminded him of a bat. “So maybe we should call you Featherbrain?”

The others all laughed at this jibe, and even Abeke smirked. Rollan was annoyed at being the object of ridicule, but also surprised. Up to this point the Redcloaks had been completely humorless. But seeing them crouched around the stewpot, he wondered if the things they’d endured had built a

bond between them ... just like the bond he felt with Abeke, Conor, and Meilin.

Perhaps Stead was being more forthright than Rollan gave him credit for. This *wasn't* an army. These were friends.

Rollan took a seat with Abeke, Kirat, and Tasha. Karmo—*Jolt*—served them steaming bowls of what smelled like fish stew.

“Ugh,” Kirat said, wrinkling his nose. “More fish.”

“At least it’s hot,” Rollan said, spooning sips into his mouth. “If experience has taught me one thing, it’s that you never turn down a hot meal. You never know if it will be your last.” He quickly finished his bowl and passed it back for another. He couldn’t help but notice that Abeke accepted a bowl, too, but only held it in her hands to warm herself.

“Guess I’m not very hungry,” she said with a weak smile when she noticed Rollan watching her. “Maybe Essix wants it?”

She set the stew on the ground. Rollan stared at Abeke’s face, at her blank expression, almost devoid of life or energy. Was that what it meant to lose a spirit animal? The thought made him shudder. Strained though his relationship with Essix could be at times, he couldn’t fathom the pain of not having her with him.

Essix hopped down to the offered bowl, pecking at the contents as best as she could. Rollan reached down and pet her cowl, glad for the reassuring touch of her presence.

There was a sound of footsteps echoing off hard stone. All at once, the relaxed manner of the Redcloaks changed as they put down their bowls and sprang to attention.

“Now that you’ve all eaten,” said a voice from behind them, “it’s time we get down to business.”

Rollan looked up to see Shane standing in the mouth of a tunnel, his figure lit orange against the magma glow. He had taken his mask off, and Rollan was again struck by his changed appearance—his yellow crocodile eyes and the glimpse of scaly green flesh creeping up his neck.

Shane had once been a strong, handsome ruler—heir to the throne of Stetriol. Now he looked like a monster.

The boy stepped into the middle of the room with the bearing of a king. Rollan had to begrudgingly admit that the name fit. “I’m sure you’re all curious why I’ve brought you here,” Shane began.

“I assumed we would go sledding,” Rollan said. “Maybe have a nice snowball fight.”

Shane ignored him and took a seat on a rock, facing the group. “We Redcloaks ... ” He paused and shook his head, as if unable or unwilling to say what needed to be said. “I’m sure you’ve recognized some former Conquerors among our people. Worthy and Jolt you’ve even fought personally.”

“And suddenly you’re acting like our best friends,” Rollan said. “It’s downright creepy ... and don’t even get me started on your weird faces. I get why you guys use masks.”

“Watch it!” Stead said, leaping to his feet, one hand on his sword.

“*Stead,*” Shane said in a commanding voice. The young man stopped, still glaring at Rollan, his jaw clenched. Finally he sat back down. Shane turned back to them. “Forgive our hot tempers. It’s a sensitive subject for some of us.”

“What happened to you all?” Abeke said, her voice hoarse. “I think you owe us that much, at least.”

Shane watched her for a long moment, then nodded. “It’s hard not to think of it as a punishment. Every one of us drank Gerathon’s Bile. When the Bile’s power faded, most Conquerors simply lost their spirit animals. Freed from our control, the beasts either attacked their former masters or fled. For a small number, however, there was no escape. One day I awoke to find I couldn’t summon Grahv from his passive form. The tattoo on my chest began to itch and fade, and in its place I found ... ”

Shane lifted his shirt, revealing a wide swathe of green, scaly skin where Rollan had once seen a crocodile’s jaw curving around his neck.

The former king of Stetriol let out a husky sigh. “It’s the same for all the others. Somehow, our spirit animals have become a part of us. Any gifts they gave us in their active states—strength, speed, uncanny powers—have

returned, but at the cost of our humanity. We are all changing. Into what, I can't say."

"How awful," Tasha said. Her clear blue eyes were wide with pity.

"I suppose it is," Shane said. "But we have so much to atone for. Me most of all." Even behind Shane's eerie stare, Rollan thought he could detect genuine pain in his face. "What we did in the war, what I did to all of you—" He looked up for a moment, his yellow gaze set on Abeke. "There's nothing I can do to fix it ... no matter how I wish I could." He shook his head, blinking at the ground.

"Is that it?" Rollan said. "You dragged us here so you could apologize? You could have written a letter and saved us all a lot of time."

"This is not just about me, or what I've done." Shane took a deep breath. "I brought you here because I need your help. Erdas needs your help." He turned his yellow gaze on Rollan. "There's someone you need to meet—someone who needs to talk to you."

Rollan rolled his eyes. He was getting tired of Shane's dramatics. "And where is this mysterious someone?"

A creaking voice whispered beneath his feet. "She's right here, birdyboy."

The voice was so close to Rollan that he immediately shouted out in surprise and leaped clear off his seat, fumbling for his dagger. The bowl of stew that he'd been holding flew up into the air and landed with a loud *slosh!* right on his head.

Rollan spun around, staring at the person who had spoken to him. It was an old woman with cracked, leathery skin, laughing with a huge toothless smile. She was lying on the ground at his feet, arms at her side. Her white hair was tangled and greasy, hanging limp from her thin face. And her eyes ... were *gone*. Where two eyes should have been there were only soft dents in the flesh—as if someone had sculpted her from clay and forgotten that one feature.

Rollan wiped fish stew from his face, still breathing heavily. For the third time in less than an hour, he was surrounded by laughing Redcloaks.

He glanced down at Essix, who seemed similarly amused. “Very funny,” he muttered, flinging boiled fish guts from his cloak.

“Sorry to have startled you, birdyboy,” the old woman said, then sniffed the air. “Or is it fishyboy? I can’t tell for sure.” She reached a gnarled finger toward him and scooped a glob of fish stew from his shin. Then she put it into her mouth, tasting. Apparently the crone approved of the taste, because the next moment she reached out again for more.

“Get off me!” Rollan cried, shoving her back. He turned toward Shane, blade raised. “Who is this crazy old bat?”

The old woman moved closer, wriggling across the ground. “I am no bat, birdyboy. Yumaris is an *earthworm!*” She scrunched up her face. “So tiny I can wriggle through the cracks of the world. So quiet I can hear the whisperings of *tomorrow* ... or is it *yesterday*?” She shook her head, as though confused about the difference between the two.

“Her name is Yumaris,” said a quiet voice. Rollan was surprised to see that it was Abeke who had spoken. Her voice sounded different, tense. “She was one of the Conquerors with Gar,” Abeke went on. “I saw her when Zerif brought me to Gar the first time, and then again when Meilin and I were taken prisoner. I think she was a seer of some kind.”

The old woman clapped her hands. “Not just *was*, hollow-girl! For all my blindness, Yumaris remains a seer still. And what I see now ... ” She shook her head, her strands of limp hair swaying back and forth. “What I see now ... ” Apparently whatever the old woman “saw” was too much to speak of, and she started muttering, twisting at the ends of her hair. The next moment she was talking to the tips of her fingers, like each of them was a little pet.

“Great,” Rollan said, sitting back down. “You dragged us halfway around the world to meet a crazy person.”

“Yumaris *is* crazy,” Shane agreed. “And dangerous.” It was clear from the tone of his voice that he might have resented the woman’s help. Rollan wondered what else had transpired between the two of them. “But she’s also useful. In these times, we can’t afford the luxury of picking our allies.”

“Tell me about it,” Rollan said, snorting.

“Her visions have kept us alive these last months,” Shane continued. “And they led us to these ruins, where even Zerif couldn’t find us. She wasn’t always quite this ... eccentric. Her spirit animal was an earthworm that gave her glimpses of the future. When she inherited these powers in full ... Well, she’s a bit confused now.”

“She thinks she’s an earthworm,” Stead said flatly.

Rollan watched Yumaris, who was currently trying to claw her way into the rocky wall with her bare hands. It looked painful. She gave up with her hands and started chewing the rock. “So why bring us to her?” Rollan said.

Shane met his eyes, his face deadly serious. “Because she’s the only thing standing between us and the destruction of the world.”



THE SNARE

THEIR MEALS FINISHED, SHANE ROSE AND APPROACHED a narrow tunnel. “Stead, please take Tasha and Kirat to the others, and help them set up camp.”

“We’re not here to do servants’ work,” Kirat said, standing. “We’re coming with you.” Cabaro was similarly inclined and growled in agreement.

“You seem to think you have some authority in this place, *little lord*,” Shane said, leaning against the rock wall. Rollan smiled to himself, thinking that Shane might dislike Kirat as much as he did. “Everyone does their part here. The truth is we only brought you along to keep Cabaro away from Zerif. I’m just as happy to throw you in a cell, if you’d prefer. What I have to say is for Greencloaks alone.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Rollan saw Abeke lower her head. “Then maybe I should join the others,” she said.

“Stop that!” Rollan swatted her arm. “You’re still a Greencloak—spirit animal or not. And there’s no way I’m going to follow Mistress Wormbrain and King Lizardface into a steaming volcano without some backup.” He made a stern face to show her that he was only half kidding. That he really did need her.

Abeke rolled her eyes, but Rollan could tell she was doing it to conceal a smile. He couldn't possibly imagine what it would be like to lose a spirit animal, but he knew that without Uraza, Abeke needed a friend now more than ever.

"King," Stead said, approaching Shane, "there was some talk of Kirat training the other Great Beast summoners in combat. Perhaps he can do that instead of chores?"

Shane considered it. "It couldn't hurt. Very well." He signaled for Stead to lead Kirat and Tasha to the outer camp.

Rollan and Abeke followed Shane and Yumaris down a steep tunnel staircase that seemed to go straight into the base of the volcano. Steaming pools of lava filled the cold air with an eerie red glow. "Are you sure it's safe to chisel away the walls of a volcano?" Rollan said, hopping over a hissing puddle of lava. "What if you, um, spring a leak?"

"That's not likely," Shane said. "These tunnels were here long before we arrived. The ruins themselves are carved from some kind of rock that doesn't melt—something mined deep within the ground."

He led them past a small balcony that overlooked the inside of the volcano. Where Rollan had expected a molten lake, he instead found an enormous round stone door made of overlapping blades that intersected in the middle—like the folds of an iris.

"The main volcano cauldron has been stopped up for centuries," Shane explained. "The lava you're seeing here is all flowing from cracks in and around the surface. So long as you watch your step, you should be fine. Plus it helps light the way."

As they circled around the floor of the ruins, Rollan noticed a towering shard of ice in the center of the cavern—a frost-covered stalagmite that was nearly as tall as the mountain. "What's with the giant icicle?" he said.

Shane shrugged, peering up at the tower. "We're not sure. There's some sort of structure underneath, but cold air from the mouth of the volcano has encased whatever it is in a sheet of ice too thick to penetrate. The tower is clearly connected to the ruins, but until we learn more, we've decided to leave it alone."

The path inside the mountain was not a straight line; rather it crisscrossed and branched a dozen times over to create an enormous maze. They continued turning one way, then the next, descending deeper underground.

“Stay with the group and keep your eyes open,” Shane said. “If you get lost in here, it could be days before we find you again.... That is, if you manage not to fall down a lava flue first.”

Despite his warning, the party was not being led by Shane. Yumaris guided the group, running her hands along the walls, sniffing the air, and getting into arguments with the stones.

Rollan watched her scramble down to her knees and rub her hair into the ground. “You sure the old lady’s fit to guide us?” he said.

“If Shane trusts Yumaris, then so should we,” Abeke said firmly. “He’s got more reason to hate her than most. She helped kill his sister.”

Rollan looked up at Shane, whose face was half covered in shadow. “The past is the past,” the boy said curtly. “Like the rest of us, Yumaris is trying to make up for old sins.”

Rollan eyed the old woman, presently sniffing some dirt she found on the tunnel ground. “Yeah, she seems really torn up about it.”

Yumaris popped the dirt into her mouth, made a face, and spit it out. “I can feel things,” she whispered. “Vibrations echoing deep underground. Footsteps long passed and footsteps not yet come.”

“That’s how you and your Redcloaks were able to track us,” Abeke said to Shane. “Yumaris could sense where we were moving.”

“Exactly,” Shane said. “But it was all we could do to keep up with Zerif. He’s clearly got his own way of tracking the Great Beasts, and it won’t be long before he finds us here.” He put his hand along the rock wall. “Luckily these ruins aren’t without natural defenses. When he gets here, we’ll be ready.”

“What exactly is this place?” Rollan said. He had by now noticed that the walls were covered in all manner of carvings. “Some kind of lost temple?”

“Not exactly a temple,” Shane said. “The ruins are an ancient trap. The work of Hellan priests that lived here centuries ago.”

“The *Hellans*?” said Rollan. “Someone needs to brush up on his geography.” Rollan had never had any formal schooling, but even he knew about the ancient Hellans. They were a people who lived in the garden paradise of Athenos a thousand years ago. “Hellans worshipped the sun and walked around barefoot. Why would they travel all the way to this frigid rock? That’s completely insane.” He glanced nervously at Yumaris. “No offense.”

“Yes, offense!” Yumaris exclaimed merrily.

“That’s true about Athenos,” Shane said, “But these carvings tell a different story. The Hellans were more far-traveled than we realized. One group of Hellan priests exiled themselves here, to the bottommost pole of the world.”

“Not a pole! A *hole*!” Yumaris chimed in. “It’s the *gullet* of Erdas, what runs from tail to tip.”

Rollan was a bit confused by all this, but Abeke seemed to follow. “So this volcano is at the world’s axis,” she said. “Well, that would explain what’s gotten into Essix.” She pointed to the falcon, who still sat perched on Rollan’s arm. “She can barely keep upright in this place.”

Rollan scrunched up his face. “What would that have to do with how she flies?”

Abeke explained, “In Nilo, every spring would bring huge flocks of homing cranes, traveling thousands of miles to a specific lake ... almost as if they had a map and compass. Our village Greencloak once told me that the birds followed magnetic currents that moved with the tides—that’s how they knew how to find their way home each year. If we’re at the bottom of the world, then those invisible currents are stronger than anything Essix has ever felt ... strong enough to completely scramble her sense of direction.”

“It’s true,” Shane said. “A few of our Redcloaks were bonded with birds. They find themselves constantly disoriented.”

Rollan wasn’t so sure. The idea that the Great Beast Essix could be bested by some “invisible currents” was alarming to say the least. And what

would happen if they faced Zerif's army in this place? Rollan would be as alone as Abeke. "So why did the Hellans build all this?" he said, returning to the subject at hand. "And why risk your own life just to show it to us?"

"These ruins are more than just some remote outpost. This whole place is an enormous snare." Shane fixed his yellow eyes on Rollan. "They built it to stop something called ... the Wyrm."

Just hearing this word made Yumaris shriek in terror. "The Wyrm! The Wyrm!" she cried. "I can hear it, uncoiling in its foul egg ... hatching deep below! We must hide! Hide!" And the next thing Rollan knew, she had scattered off down some dark tunnel, abandoning the rest of the group.

Shane shook his head, like he had seen this before. "She can really run when she puts her mind to it. I should know better than to mention the Wyrm in her presence. She'll be useless for the rest of the day."

"How *ever* will we survive?" Rollan said with mock despair.

"I've heard of the Wyrm before," Abeke said. "Zerif mentioned it when we fought in Amaya. He said it was awakening, and that *he* was awakening with it."

"If Zerif likes it, then I hate it," Rollan said. "So what exactly is this Wyrm thing? Some kind of fancy new spirit animal?"

"I don't think it's new," Shane said, continuing down the path. "I think it's older than the Great Beasts. And if I'm reading these carvings correctly, it's the source of the parasites—everyone who is infected is somehow drawn to the Wyrm, forced to do its bidding."

Rollan knew this wasn't quite true. "Hate to contradict you, boss, but we've seen the effects of the parasites firsthand. Everyone infected is under Zerif's control, not some Wyrm. Once they're infected, beasts and humans alike do exactly what he commands." He tried not to look at Abeke when he said this—recalling how Uraza had tried to attack her in Nilo.

"That may be true," Shane said. "But what if *something else* is controlling Zerif? What if he, too, is being used by the Wyrm?"

"Zerif commands an army of humans and spirit animals," Abeke said. "Could this Wyrm possibly be so powerful?"

“I don’t know,” Shane said, shrugging. “Gerathon could exert control over those of us who drank the Bile, but not on this level. All I know is what these carvings tell us. They say that the Wyrms egg fell from the stars and landed in a place called Sadre, deep under the earth. It’s been living dormant underground for centuries. Until now. The Wyrms is waking, and when it hatches, it will devour everything in its path.”

Rollan swallowed. “Conor and Meilin are underground. They were trapped after falling into some hidden doorway. You’re saying they’re down there with that thing?”

“Possibly,” Shane said. “And my source tells me they had another with them, a boy named Takoda, who summoned his own Great Beast.”

All of this was true, but Rollan was surprised that Shane knew it. “Just how many spies do you have?” he said.

Shane shrugged. “Only one—but he’s *very* good at his job. I’m taking you to meet him now.”

Shane pointed to the wall beside him, which was etched with drawings of ancient figures digging holes at different points on the globe, meeting in the middle. “According to these carvings, the volcano was drained to make room for some kind of snare. Beneath those doors in the floor of the chamber is a tunnel that goes clear down through the center of Erdas. And somewhere in the middle is a thing called the Chamber of Tides. It’s a construction powerful enough to stop the Wyrms.”

“So if the Hellans completed the trap,” Rollan said, “then why haven’t they used it yet? Why is the Wyrms still alive?”

“It’s not so easy,” Shane said, and he led them down the corridor. “This trap can’t be sprung until *after* the Wyrms hatches. And it’s unclear how we’re supposed to open the doors and activate the trap—they wanted to keep that a secret. If we’re reading the carvings correctly, there’s only one living soul who knows how to activate the snare. The same one who helped build this place. Though getting his help might be difficult.”

“I’d imagine so!” Rollan quipped. “This place is thousands of years old. Whoever built it is probably a *bit* indisposed at the moment. Dead like the rest of the Hellans.”

“Unless ... ” Abeke said. “They weren’t *human* hands.” She turned to Shane. “The one you’re speaking of wasn’t a Hellan, was he? You’re talking about a Great Beast?”

“A Great Beast built this place?” Rollan said. “Which one?”

“An old friend of ours,” Shane said as he rounded a corner. He pointed into the shadows toward a face carved into the stone. Rollan peered through the lava-lit corridor and stared at the carving. It was a large face, with a heavy brow, dark eyes, and sharp fangs. It was a face of pure evil.

“Kovo?” Rollan said. “You’ve got to be kidding.”



ABEKE GLANCED AT ROLLAN, WHOSE FACE WAS TWISTED with confused disbelief, and she thought she knew how he felt. They had just been told by Shane that Kovo—the Kovo—was the secret mastermind of this centuries-old plan to stop the Wym.

“Kovo ... ?” she said, unable to look away from the hideous carving before her. “But he’s ... he’s ... ” She shook her head, somehow unable to form a complete thought.

“He’s pure evil!” Rollan burst out.

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Shane said. “I was as shocked as anyone.”

Abeke nodded, swallowing. Shocked didn’t begin to describe what she was feeling. Her hands were clammy and she could feel her heart racing in her chest. Even after all that had passed between her and Shane, so many betrayals, she still somehow believed he was trying to help. But one look at this carving and she knew the truth: Shane would never change.

“You’re working for Kovo,” she said, inching away from Shane, who was watching her intently. “How could I have been so stupid to trust you?”

“I’m not *working for* Kovo,” Shane said to her, his voice pleading. “All I know is what the carvings have told us—that Kovo knows the secret of this

place. Whether we like it or not, he is the key to destroying the Wyrn.”

“You ever think that he’s just trying to eliminate the competition?” Rollan said. “Kovo is evil, end of story. If he made this snare, then it can only be for his own selfish gain. We’d be fools to trust him.” He shot a look at Shane. “Or you, for that matter.”

“Don’t forget that I saved your life,” Shane said, stepping toward him. “More than once.”

“Stop fighting,” Abeke said. She pushed both boys apart. “Whatever we’re feeling doesn’t matter. Zerif’s army is out there, and he’s collecting Great Beasts—three of which are currently residing on this island. If we want to have a chance of stopping him *or* the Wyrn, we need to act quickly before he finds us.” It wasn’t exactly what she felt, but the force of her words seemed to make an impact on the boys.

“Four,” Shane said quietly.

“What?” Rollan snapped.

“There are *four* Great Beasts on the island.” He turned toward a narrow corridor leading away from the middle of the volcano. “Follow me.”

Abeke and Rollan trailed Shane through several corners, the tunnel growing colder and colder until they reached a large chamber carved out of rock deep underground. They were far below sea level, and the tunnel *should* have been flooded. Abeke reasoned that the dip had actually trapped the air inside.

A small pool of warm water bubbled up in the middle of the floor, creating a steaming hot spring that made the air damp and salty.

Sitting at the edge of the water was a small girl with strange, almost bluish skin. She was dressed in draped cloth. Her bare legs rested in the pool, and she was weaving a blanket from strands of long seaweed.

Shane approached the girl. “Niri, say hello to our friends.”

The girl put down her work and turned her head toward them. “We’ve been waiting for you.” She said this warmly but made no effort to stand and greet them properly.

Abeke stepped closer and saw that Niri’s skin was painted blue with swirling tattoos that covered her whole body. “You’re from the Hundred

Isles,” she said. She offered a kind smile, knowing something of those tropical climes. “You must hate the snow almost as much as I do.”

“Niri was there when Zerif and his army burned her entire village to the ground,” Shane said darkly. “She’s probably beyond hating things like weather.”

“Forgive me for not standing to greet you,” the girl said. “I find myself unequal to the task.” She lifted the corner of her seaweed blanket to reveal that her legs were both thin and misshapen.

“Your legs don’t work,” Abeke said, trying not to sound horrified. “Did Zerif do that?”

“I was born unable to walk or even swim,” Niri said simply. “In the Hundred Isles, our lives are lived in the sea. Not being able to swim made me an outcast. Not even the healers would agree to see me. They believed my family had violated *tapu*. My father and mother cared for me in isolation, far from shore, shunned by the rest of our tribe.”

“In the end that’s what saved her,” Shane said. “When Zerif’s army landed, all her kinsmen rushed to fight him, but she was left behind in the jungle. He burned the village down looking for Niri, but she was smart enough to keep herself hidden until the Redcloaks could rescue her.”

“Why did Zerif want you?” Rollan said.

“He didn’t want me,” Niri said. “He wanted *him*.” The girl pointed to the ceiling of the cave. There was a place where the rock had been replaced with a sheet of solid ice that shone blue light on them—sealing them off from the ocean water. The ice was cloudy, but on the other side Abeke could just make out the shadow of a large creature floating back and forth in the water. A creature with eight legs.

“Mulop!” Abeke said.

Indeed it was Mulop, and upon hearing his name spoken, the octopus swung his many arms in greeting. The Great Octopus looked smaller than when Abeke had last seen him in the grotto beyond Dagger Point, but he was still enormous. The shadow darted from view and a moment later there was a splashing at Abeke’s feet as a large tentacle rose up from the pool of water and nuzzled itself against Niri’s hand. Mulop’s skin had an iridescent

glow, like the inside of an oyster shell—a hundred colors reflecting in the cavern all around.

“Tell you honestly,” Rollan said. “I’m relieved to see it’s Mulop you’ve got down here. I was afraid we were going to be shaking hands with Gerathon!”

“Mulop saved my life in more ways than I can count,” Niri said. “When Zerif attacked my village, Mulop was able to cloud the minds of his army and keep me hidden. And even before that, he changed my life. Mulop’s thoughts stretch to every corner of Erdas, and he shares a connection with every living thing. Through our bond, I’ve felt my own senses expand, letting me experience parts of Erdas I would never have imagined. That’s how I was able to sense the Redcloaks coming to my aid.”

Abeke looked at the girl, her bony legs thin beneath the blanket. She wondered what it would have been like to grow up not knowing the joy of running or swimming or climbing a tree. The appearance of Mulop must have been a revelation—it was a chance at a new life.

But thinking of someone else’s spirit animal only made her miss her own. She tried to picture Uraza somewhere far from here. Even knowing that the leopard was under Zerif’s control, she still wished she could see her spirit animal once more.

“What do you mean by *sense*?” Rollan said, interrupting Abeke’s thoughts. “Mulop gives you the power to feel the minds of others?”

Niri nodded. “He can also cloud our own minds, making *us* harder to sense—which is what he’s doing right now.”

“That’s the reason we’ve been able to stay hidden from Zerif’s army for so long,” Shane said. “So long as Mulop is on our side, Zerif will never be able to track us here. But the time for hiding is over. Now we need Mulop to help us find Kovo.”

“Wait,” Abeke said. “Kovo is underground with Meilin and Conor. Why not have him talk to Briggan?” Her mind flashed to Conor’s face, sick with worry over his own infection. She hoped he was all right.

Rollan swallowed beside her. “Or maybe, um, Jhi?” Abeke glanced at the boy whose cheeks seemed to have reddened at the mention of Meilin’s

spirit animal. “Just a thought.”

Shane shook his head. “I’m afraid we can’t. Since he was reborn, Mulop’s powers are considerably diminished. He’ll only be able to maintain a connection for a very short time. And in order to talk to Kovo, Mulop will need to stop hiding our locations. We’ll be exposed. Once that happens, Zerif will come for us. Hopefully we’ll have enough time to learn how to trigger the snare.”

“What if Kovo doesn’t want to help?” Abeke said.

Shane met her eyes. “Then we’re all as good as dead.”



THE PRISONER

MEILIN DIPPED A MOSS SPONGE INTO A STONE BASIN filled with stagnant water. She wrung it out and dabbed it across Conor's burning forehead, across the dark spiral that spread along his skin like a cancer. His clothes were soaked in cold sweat, and he was shivering. "This will help the fever," she said, hoping it was true.

The boy lolled his head in her direction, swallowing with cracked lips. There were dark wells below his eyes. Conor hadn't taken food in days. "Meilin," he said, his voice faint and pleading. "Let ... me ... go."

"You know I can't," Meilin said. She looked down at the ropes bound around his wrists and ankles. Conor had cut deep wounds into his flesh trying to pull himself free. The wounds would become infected soon if they didn't find some way to clean them. But she knew that releasing him would be his death. Ever since setting foot in this cursed city, Conor had become overwhelmed by a desire to reach the Wyrms. He would have blindly scaled the spiraling bell tower in the middle of the city, which stood directly beneath the Wyrms' pulsing glow. And when there was no more tower to scale, he would have jumped from the tower, trying to reach the egg, his thin arms outstretched, falling to his death. Meilin knew this was true

because the courtyard around the tower was already thick with the broken bodies of those who had tried the very same thing. Sacrifices to the Wyrms.

Conor had been infected by one of the Wyrms' parasites in Nilo. He had fought bravely against the corroding power, but it was clear that his constitution was fading. When they first landed in this fallen Sadrean city, the home of the Wyrms, Conor had tried running toward the egg, fighting anyone who dared to get in his way, even his own spirit animal, Briggan. Meilin and Takoda had finally resorted to binding his hands and feet so he couldn't run. Briggan now lay beside Conor, curled up like a guard dog. Whether he was trying to protect Conor from the group or the group from Conor was unclear.

"We can't release you," Meilin said again. "Not until you're free of the Wyrms' control. It's for your own protection."

Conor grit his teeth, lurching as if a surge of pain had just slithered through his whole body. "Let me GO!" he growled. He jerked his arms and feet, pulling at his ropes, even though the struggle clearly caused him more pain.

Meilin set down her sponge and touched the tattoo on her arm. Jhi, the Great Panda, appeared at her side, yawning. Meilin reached out and scratched the black fur behind Jhi's ears. "Can you help him?" she whispered. "Can you stop the cuts on his arms and legs from getting infected?"

Jhi cast a doubtful look at the boy but nodded solemnly and lumbered toward Conor. Meilin noted with a pang of sympathy that Jhi's body looked thin, which was not a good look for a great panda. There had been little food beyond what mushrooms and roots the group could forage—and these were not things that Jhi enjoyed eating. Meilin tried to keep her in passive state as often as possible, but she also knew that Conor needed all the help he could get.

She watched as Jhi stepped around Briggan to Conor's side. The panda leaned down and licked the wounds around Conor's bound ankles.

"Get away from me!" Conor screamed, kicking his legs.

Jhi gave a sharp *yip* as Conor's foot struck her in the muzzle.

“Conor!” Meilin shouted, standing. She already had her fists out, ready to defend her spirit animal. Briggan had sprung to his feet and was crouched beside her, also growling at Conor.

Jhi turned toward both of them and shook her head, letting them know that she was unharmed. She turned back to Conor and again began ministering to the boy’s wounds. Conor struggled but soon gave way to exhaustion and fell back asleep.

“Thanks,” Meilin said, looking down at Briggan. “I know this can’t be easy for you, either.”

The wolf let out a quiet whine, his tail slunk down, and returned to Conor’s feet.



THE FALLEN CITY

AFTER SUMMONING JHI BACK INTO PASSIVE STATE, Meilin left Conor to visit the top deck of the lighthouse. A modest structure overlooked the shores of the Sulfur Sea. This building, like everything else in the city, was carved from some sort of rare stone that she had never seen before. She found Takoda at the top of the steps, seated at the open window.

“I heard shouts downstairs,” Takoda said. “Conor?”

Meilin nodded, chewing at the inside of her cheek. “He’s asleep now. Jhi is tending to him.” Kovo was nowhere to be seen, which didn’t surprise her. The Great Beast spent most of his time maintaining the glowstone perimeter that he had set up around the center of the city. The Many were afraid of the light, and the glowstones created a barrier that protected them from approaching the bell tower. Kovo was almost fanatical about the glowstones. He spent every day maintaining them, searching for new stones to replace those that had begun to dim.

Meilin joined Takoda at the window, which overlooked the eastern half of the city. The lamp in the lighthouse was meant to be fueled by glowstones, which Kovo had taken away. In their stead he had stocked the lighthouse with clay urns of oil and medicine that he had gathered from

apothecaries and abandoned shops around the city. He insisted that the urns remain untouched but when asked what they were for, he refused to explain.

Meilin, Conor, and Takoda had been traveling the caverns of Sadre for what must have been weeks now. Down here it was like a second world, one hidden beneath the surface of Erdas, populated by its own tribes and creatures. Meilin certainly missed the warmth of the sun, but what she missed most was the simple ability to count the days. In Sadre there were no days, only perpetual darkness—one endless night.

“You don’t know how important sunlight is until it’s gone,” she said.

Takoda nodded slightly, his eyes fixed on the slightly phosphorescent waves lapping against the shore. “It’s kind of peaceful, though,” he said.

Meilin didn’t know how to respond to this, and so she said nothing. She stared at the Sulfur Sea, which even from here emitted an unpleasant brimstone aroma. They had only barely escaped those dark waters.

In her mind, Meilin could still hear the piercing shriek of the corrupted eels that had nearly devoured her and her friends. She tried not to think of Teutar and the rest of the crew of the *Meleager*, who had sacrificed themselves so Meilin and her friends could continue their quest to stop the Wyrn.

And now, after so much struggle and pain, they had reached their destination: a fallen city that looked to be older than time. Giant stone towers connected by bridges and twisting staircases were chiseled right out of the strange rock.

“It must have been beautiful, don’t you think? Before everything?” Takoda had asked the question upon landing on the shores of the city. Meilin noticed that Kovo had grimaced at his human partner—almost like a smile.

Even after all their travels, after all they had endured together, Meilin was still uncomfortable having the Great Ape in their party. He made no move to betray them, but she couldn’t erase the memory of that final battle against Kovo at the Evertree. The gorilla was selfish, cruel, and, worst of all, he was smart. If it weren’t for the fact that he alone seemed to have

some sense of what was going on, she would have left Kovo behind a dozen times now.

Takoda had always argued that he thought Kovo's reasons for trying to take control of the Evertree were more complicated than *just* world domination. Now, seeing its roots firsthand, Meilin could only begrudgingly agree.

The city was located directly below the Evertree, whose silver roots spread across the cavernous ceiling, bathing the entire place in an eerie glow. And tangled in the roots of the tree was an enormous pulsing egg sack, tucked between the tendrils: the Wyrm.

Kovo had signed to Takoda that this place was called Hole, which was a strange name for a city. Meilin suspected that this was a bad translation. Then again, what did she know about these people or their naming customs? She had also noticed some carvings in the walls that seemed to be Hellan, which made sense. The Sadreans were descended, in more ways than one, from the ancient culture.

The Wyrm had not yet hatched, but Meilin could tell from the fractures in the egg's membrane that it would soon. The Evertree roots around the egg were starting to rot and fray—which also frayed Meilin's bond with Jhi. Even now, thousands of tiny wriggling parasites slithered from the cracks and fell to the ground far below. The same parasites that had spread all across Sadre, taking over any living thing they touched.

The people of Hole had long since been overwhelmed by the parasites. They were now what the Sadreans called the Many—shuffling, mindless drones enslaved to the will of the Wyrm. Meilin closed her eyes, thinking again of Conor. How much longer until he joined their ranks?

The streets were clogged with the Wyrm's wriggling parasites, and so they had been forced to make camp on higher ground in the lighthouse at the edge of the city. Takoda and Kovo had blocked all the lower entrances. It was a safe place, but they were still trapped. And eventually, the Many would find a way in. The Many always found a way in.

Meilin knew this because she had already seen it happen in the city of Phos Astos. The Many had overwhelmed the Sadreans who lived there and

destroyed them. If it weren't for the actions of a brave girl named Xanthe, Meilin and her friends might have been among the casualties. Xanthe had led them away from the destruction—away from her own crumbling home—in order to find the Wyrms.

"I wish Xanthe was here," Takoda whispered, as if reading Meilin's thoughts. "I'll bet she knows a lot about this place."

Meilin bristled. The girl had been lost during a fiery race across the Arachane Fields—Xanthe had begged them not to set fire to the fields, but Takoda hadn't listened.

And now Xanthe was gone.

Takoda had taken the loss especially hard, and Meilin suspected that he secretly blamed himself for it. But blame aside, she knew that this was no time for mourning.

"*Knew*," Meilin said, more brusquely than she meant. "She *knew* about this place. She's gone, Takoda. The best thing you can do to honor her sacrifice is finish what we set out to do."

Takoda looked at her with his deep, dark eyes. "You don't know that she's dead," he said. "Not for sure."

"Maybe not," Meilin said. "But I *do* know that we need you here. This whole place is swarming with the Many, and that egg is on the verge of hatching. We can't have you pining at the window for your lost crush."

Takoda could never know it, but Meilin's words were just as much for herself as him. She, too, had left someone behind. Someone she desperately longed to see once more.

"This is war, Takoda. We have to behave like warriors."

Takoda narrowed his eyes. "You sound like Kovo. Besides, if you truly believed that, you would have left Conor behind."

"Conor got infected trying to save you!" Meilin said, stomping her foot. "Besides, he's a Greencloak. He's one of us."

"Greencloaks ... " Takoda's face twisted with disgust. "You all think that having a spirit animal is what makes someone special," he said, his expression strained with emotion. "A spirit animal isn't a gift. It's a curse. It defines you before you have a chance to define yourself. After my parents

died, the monastery was the only place I'd finally felt at peace. I was supposed to be a monk, to spend my life transcribing scrolls and ringing holy bells. Now I'm nothing but Kovo the Ape's human partner. A sidekick to a monster."

Takoda was usually so meek and conciliatory, but not now. His hands were clenched into tight fists at his side. He looked like he wanted to throttle something. It was clear he had been sitting on this well of anger for some time. "If I didn't have a spirit animal, I'd still be home with my brothers and sisters. And Xanthe would still be safe."

"There is no safe," Meilin said, softening her tone. "Not anymore." She remembered her own mighty empire of Zhong falling to waves of Conquerors. She remembered her father dying on the battlefield, his life snuffed out as she watched. "Your monastery would have been destroyed by the Many, or Zerif, or the Wyrms. Xanthe's city would have fallen even if we hadn't arrived. What threatens us now threatens all of Erdas. If you want to save Nilo and Phos Astos, then we have to destroy the Wyrms—quickly, before it can hatch."

She crouched down and began drawing a map of the city in the dusty floor with her finger. "I've been thinking: Maybe Kovo can help us salvage parts to build a siege engine. With a catapult we could launch some kind of missile at the egg. My father's armies used them to defend their fortresses. I think I can draw up plans." She knew doing such a thing would also damage the Evertree, but she thought it was worth the risk.

Takoda stepped back. "We've been through this already," he said firmly. "Kovo says we have to wait."

"Wait for *what*?" Meilin said, striking the ground with her hand. Ever since reaching the ruined city, there had been ongoing tension about how to destroy the Wyrms. Meilin knew they had to act, but Kovo—again and again—insisted that they not disturb the egg.

She stood up, meeting Takoda's eye. "The Wyrms are only going to get stronger. We've journeyed all this way, racing to get here before it hatches. And now we're supposed to just sit around and wait for it to do just that?"

"Yes."

Meilin threw up her arms. “If you hate Kovo so much, why are you taking his side?”

Takoda sighed. “I don’t hate him. I wish I could, but my bond won’t let me. And I—I can just tell that this is different.... ” He shook his head, trying to describe something indescribable. “Kovo may hate humans, but he hates the Wyrms even more. He wants to stop it as much as anyone. When it’s time to act, he’ll let us know.”

Meilin blew a strand of dark hair from her face. “And just when will that be? Because soon every person in Erdas will become infected by the Wyrms’ parasites. What’s happening to Conor downstairs will happen to all of us unless we *act*. Do you want that blood on your hands?”

Before Takoda could answer, there was a loud *whump* from the other end of the room. The impact was so great that it shook the floor beneath them.

Meilin turned to see Kovo had scaled the tower from outside, returning from his rounds. The Great Ape lumbered in through the window, eyes wide. He looked out of breath, like he had raced clear across the city to reach them.

“What’s got you all worked up?” she said.

The ape ignored her, staggering closer. He placed an enormous black hand on Takoda’s shoulder. The moment he made contact with his human partner, the boy gasped, as if the very breath had been pulled from his lungs.

“I ... I ... ” the boy said, his voice hollow and strange.

Meilin stared at Takoda’s dark eyes, which had changed to a shimmering, iridescent color—like the inside of an oyster shell. She saw now that Kovo’s eyes were likewise transformed.

“Takoda?” Meilin said. “What did he do to you?”

The boy turned toward her, blinking his swirling eyes.

“I have a message from Abeke and Rollan.”



VOICE FROM AFAR

MEILIN STARED AT TAKODA AND KOVO, BOTH OF THEM opal-eyed and unblinking. “You have ... what?” she asked.

Takoda tilted his head, as if trying to hear a faint sound. “Someone named Shane is with them.”

Meilin nearly choked on her spit. “*Shane?* The same Shane who tried to conquer the world?” If Shane was with them, it could only mean that they were in trouble.

Takoda shrugged, shaking his head. “I’m just the messenger,” he said. “I actually don’t really understand what’s happening.”

Kovo grunted and made a gesture to Takoda with one hand. The boy nodded and turned back to Meilin. “Kovo says it’s him. I ... I think he’s trying to help. He’s been working to keep the Great Beasts from Zerif, just like your friends. He’s trying to make up for past sins.”

Meilin narrowed her eyes. “He told you *all that* with just a flick of his wrist?” She knew that Kovo and Takoda had devised a way of communicating through gestures, but this seemed different.

Takoda shrugged again. “He didn’t have to say it. I just ... *knew.*” Takoda seemed as genuinely confused by all this as she was. “It’s like I can

hear different voices in my head. Kovo ... and a girl I don't know, and one more ... Mulop?"

"Mulop?" Meilin said. Something like comprehension began to dawn on her. "The Great Beast?" She took a trembling breath. It was obvious that *something* strange was happening to Kovo and Takoda, even if she couldn't tell what. She didn't trust it. For all she knew, this was another plot by Shane, or perhaps some new effect of the Wyrms. "How are they contacting us?" she said carefully.

"How are you contacting us?" Takoda repeated. He cast his ear to the air and responded a moment later. "Mulop has linked minds with Kovo ... but the connection will not last very long. We are ... very far away, and Mulop's powers are weak." Takoda's voice was stilted, as though he were carefully repeating something that was being dictated to him. "Where are you?"

"I'm not sure we can tell them that," Meilin said, inching back. "How do we know we can trust you?"

Takoda repeated her question and then listened for the answer. He snorted slightly before saying, "Rollan would like me to ask Jhi what it's like being bonded to a snotty general's daughter. Also, he wants to know if stubbornness is a skill you picked up from your fancy tutors."

A smile spread across Meilin's face. "That's Rollan, all right." She hoped that neither Takoda nor Kovo could hear the catch in her voice or see her blushing. "Fine," she said, regaining her composure. "What do you need to know?"



10

KOVO SPEAKS

ROLLAN STOOD NEXT TO ABEKE AND SHANE IN THE cold cavern, shivering. Drops of water ran down icy stalactites and splashed on the wet floor in small puddles. Before him sat Niri, her legs dangling in the steaming water. The girl's eyes swirled with a rainbow of colors, her blue-inked fingers clutching Mulop's tentacle.

It had worked. They were *actually* talking to Meilin. Which meant Meilin was *alive*. A thousand questions churned around in Rollan's mind as he tried to decide what to ask.

But before Rollan could say anything, Shane spoke up. "What can Kovo tell us about the Wyrm? Does he know how to stop it?"

Rollan gritted his teeth. "Why does *he* get to do all the talking?"

Abeke put a calming hand on his arm. "If it weren't for Shane, we wouldn't be here at all."

Niri asked Shane's question. After a moment, she began speaking for Kovo. It was her voice, but the phrasing and tone sounded different—like she was channeling Kovo's cold growl with every word.

"Aeons ago, the Wyrm's egg fell from the stars," she began, "like a stone plunging into a pool. It was a time before humans fouled the soil with their presence." The girl screwed up her mouth, as if trying to find a word.

“Things were *quiet*. Still. The world was golden and blue... Beasts lived alongside one another in harmony—fed by the Evertree. Spirit animals didn’t exist. Neither did the Great Beasts.”

Rollan had trouble imagining a world without humans or spirit animals or Great Beasts. The thought of a world without Essix saddened him.

“In those ancient days,” Niri continued, “the continents were a single mass that covered half the world. Mountains and deserts and snow were all together in this place—all of Erdas’s wonders in a single room. When the Wurm’s egg struck the earth, the impact was so great that the land shattered into pieces, floating apart from one another.”

“So a falling egg *shattered* the world?” Rollan muttered, with not a small amount of skepticism. “In my experience, that’s not what happens when eggs hit the ground.”

Niri shook her head, clarifying in her own voice. “I don’t think it was an ordinary egg. Its shell was made from a rock stronger than anything on Erdas.” A moment later, she continued speaking for Kovo. “The Wurm was drawn to the Evertree—it could sense the life coursing through its branches. When the Wurm landed, it caused great destruction—storms, floods, and earthquakes—that wiped out nearly every living thing for miles. Only fifteen creatures survived—sheltered from death by the branches of the Evertree.”

“The Great Beasts ... ” Abeke whispered. “That’s why you know all this. You were *there*.”

Rollan shot a look over to the girl. Abeke’s eyes were wide with wonder. “So, you’re telling us that the Wurm somehow *created* the Great Beasts,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” said Niri after a moment. “Our peaceful lives were over. Everything we knew and loved had been destroyed. We fifteen beasts were all that remained. But worst of all was what the Wurm did to the tree itself. The Evertree survived the impact, but it was different.”

“Different *how*?” Rollan said.

“The tree no longer gave mere life. It did something more dangerous—it forged an invisible bond that flowed between living things.” She paused a

moment to let these words sink in. “The Evertree is the source of the spirit animal bond. And the Wyrms are the source of that power. Everything leads back to *it*.”

“You’re telling us that it’s the Wyrms that created the spirit animal bond,” Rollan said, and this time there was no skepticism in his voice. “Why would it do that?”

“The same reason all creatures do what they do,” Niri said for Kovo. “Because it is *hungry*.”

“I don’t buy it.” Rollan waved his hands, interrupting Niri. “If the Wyrms created spirit animal bonds, then it’s *good*. Isn’t it? Why would an evil creature bring life? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s a good question,” Shane said.

Niri asked the question aloud and then gave Kovo’s response. “The Wyrms are a parasite that feeds on life itself. And like any parasite, it is both hungry ... and patient. In order to feed, it needs two things. First, a food source. Thanks to the Evertree, it now has that in abundance. Second, it needs a host in order to fully mature. Once hatched, it will bond itself to that host—and then it will be unstoppable. For centuries, it has been waiting for a creature strong enough to contain it. And for just as long, *I alone* have been working to stop it.”

“Kovo the long-suffering hero?” Rollan threw his hands up. “I thought Yumaris was crazy, but this takes the cake.”

“Impudent human!” Niri’s lips curled suddenly into a snarl. All at once, Rollan could see Kovo’s scowling face peering out through the girl’s features.

“Niri?” Shane asked, stepping tentatively forward.

“*I alone* sensed the Wyrms’ hunger,” Niri growled, her voice thick with contempt—she wasn’t just translating for Kovo anymore; it was like he was speaking directly through her. “The weakness twisting beneath the world. The corruption that fueled *every* spirit animal bond. My war against the Greencloaks was a war against *the Wyrms*—for only my brethren and I could possibly contain its power.”

Niri was practically spitting now, her face a mask of fury. Her gleaming opal eyes flared red. “My first attempt to destroy it with the Hellans failed. Human civilizations are castles made of sand—easily washed away. So I took matters into my own hands. I would gather the talismans and wrest control of the Evertree, by force if necessary. Better a thousand kingdoms fall than the Wyrms should claim its host. Better my siblings *die* than become slaves to such a *thing*.”

Rollan glimpsed Shane, who was watching the girl with his mouth agape. Rollan felt a rare twist of sympathy for the fallen monarch. *Shane’s* kingdom had been one of those thousands that Kovo was so willing to sacrifice.

He also felt confusion. Rollan tried to consider what was being said—that Kovo’s wicked plotting had all been in defense of Erdas—but he couldn’t believe it. Kovo had killed too many, had destroyed too much, to ever be *good*.

“Once the Evertree was destroyed,” Niri continued, her face softening, “its grip on the Wyrms loosened. The Wyrms grew restless. It will wait no longer. Through its parasites, the Wyrms is creating its *own* perfect host. Someone more powerful than all the Great Beasts combined.”

“Zerif,” Abeke said. A silence shivered through the cavern. The thought of an even more powerful version of Zerif—one bonded with an aeons-old malevolent Wyrms—was too frightening to contemplate.

“This all sounds nice, but it’s just a theory,” Rollan said. “If the egg isn’t hatched, how does Kovo know what the Wyrms is planning?”

“He’s telling the truth about Zerif,” Shane said. “Mulop has been peering inside Zerif’s mind. Zerif thinks he’s in control, but he’s being manipulated, just like all of the infected.”

Niri swallowed, her face trembling from the strain of the connection. Drops of sweat fell from her hair. “The Wyrms is waiting until Zerif has gathered enough power,” she said slowly, “and then it will break free from its egg and find him. Once they’re bonded, nothing will be able to stop it from consuming the world.”

“We know these ruins are some sort of trap that Kovo helped the Hellans build,” Shane said. “We need to know how to trigger the trap. How do we stop the Wyrms from hatching and bonding with Zerif?”

Niri frowned, her breath coming in ragged gasps. “How do we stop the Wyrms?” she said. She turned her head, as though she were having trouble hearing the response. When she spoke, her words were halting. “The ... only way to trigger ... the snare ... ” She interrupted herself with a sharp gasp. Mulop’s tentacle slipped from her grip, sliding back into the pool of water. Niri fell backward, her body limp.

“The only way is *what?*” Shane cried, running toward Niri, who had slumped over on the rock. He grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her. “How do we trigger the snare?”

“It looks like our little chat is over,” Rollan said, noting that he could no longer see Mulop’s shadowy form on the other side of the icy wall.

Niri turned her head toward Shane, blinking. Her eyes had returned to normal, and her face was pale from fright. “Zerif,” she whispered. “He’s found us.”



HALF A PLAN

MEILIN STOOD IN THE DARKENED LIGHTHOUSE, staring at Takoda, whose eyes had returned to their normal brown color. Both he and Kovo looked like they were recovering from a bout of particularly bad nausea.

“Are you okay?” Meilin asked, grabbing the boy by the arm so he didn’t tumble out the open window.

Takoda ran a trembling hand through his dark hair. “Just dizzy,” he said. “I had four separate voices echoing in my head. It was hard to make sense of it all.” His eyes flashed to Kovo, who seemed to have become very interested in the view out the window.

“Well, just take a moment to catch your breath,” Meilin said. “Jhi can help with the nausea.” And so saying, she summoned Jhi, who immediately toddled to Takoda’s side and began nuzzling a place on the boy’s temple.

Kovo remained where he stood, but his bearing was altogether less fierce than it had been half an hour before. It was clear that his little tirade had drained him.

The ape reached out a giant hand and patted Takoda on the shoulder in a way that alarmed Meilin for its gentleness. Perhaps their little conversation had changed the way Takoda and Kovo felt about each other. She glanced at Jhi, following the panda as she worked. Meilin wondered what it would be

like to truly inhabit the mind of her spirit animal. A part of her feared what she would learn if she could hear Jhi's true opinion of her.

"Do you know why the connection was cut short?" she asked after Takoda had more fully recovered. "What happened to Abeke and Rollan?"

Takoda swallowed. "I don't know.... Mulop couldn't maintain the connection. Something pulled his attention away. I could feel it, too, for a heartbeat—the thing that interrupted him. I could sense something approaching."

Kovo nodded, making a sign that she recognized as "danger."

"Zerif," Meilin said, stepping back. "He must have found them." She closed her fists tight, wishing she could fight alongside her friends. She didn't know what to make of the fact that Shane was with them now, but she hoped the former Conqueror could protect Abeke and Rollan in the coming battle.

Meilin shook these fears from her mind. They had a mission to complete, and she couldn't let herself get distracted. "We have to destroy the Wyrm before it can hatch and bond with Zerif," she said. "Let's get started."

"I don't think we can kill the Wyrm before it hatches," Takoda said. "The only thing that can get through that egg is the Wyrm itself. It would have hatched already, if it weren't for those roots binding it tight—the tree is trying to save us all."

"But I thought the Evertree was part of the Wyrm's evil plan?" She was still struggling to process this new idea that the spirit bond was really the product of the Wyrm. "The tree is a puppet, just like the rest of us."

"Maybe so," Takoda said. "But maybe, like us, the Evertree knows what it means for the Wyrm to hatch. Just like we're fighting against its power, so is the tree."

Meilin cast a sidelong glance at the boy. She didn't know how things went in southern Nilo, but in Zhong, people didn't believe that plants had feelings. "If the Evertree can't stop it, then how do we?"

Takoda eyed the ceiling. "It's like the Sadrean elders told us in Phos Astos. Kovo helped the ancient Hellans build this place to stop the Wyrm."

“I remember,” Meilin said. “They said he constructed some kind of secret weapon.” She turned to the gorilla. “So where is this weapon?”

The ape snorted and then made a gesture.

“We’re standing in it,” Takoda explained. “The city *is* the trap.”

“Great,” Meilin said. “So all we have to do is set it off. How do we do that?”

“Kovo won’t say. Even though I could see inside Kovo’s mind, hear his thoughts, it was clear that he wanted to keep that knowledge hidden.” The boy touched the handle of an enormous iron mallet propped against the wall. Kovo had found the mallet on their first day in the city and now kept it with him always. “I think it has something to do with this mallet.”

Kovo turned, glaring at them both and snarling. He marched over to Takoda and snatched the mallet from the boy, as though it weighed no more than a twig. He obviously wanted to cut short their speculation about how this trap might actually work.

“This is no time for secrets,” Meilin said, following after the gorilla. “If you know something, you have to tell us.”

“Don’t judge him too harshly,” Takoda said. “He’s guarded this place for centuries. I think he’s afraid of one of us becoming infected by the Wurm’s parasites and betraying our plan.”

“As if *we’re* the ones who can’t be trusted,” Meilin said, folding her arms. “Speaking of traps, this feels an awful lot like we’re walking into one.”

She recalled with a flash of rage the way Kovo had manipulated and used humans, animals, and even his fellow Great Beasts. How he had raised up an army of Conquerors to destroy the Greencloaks. “Who’s to say Kovo’s not just plotting to take control of the Wurm and harness its power for himself? It wouldn’t be the first time he’s tried it.”

The gorilla gave a low, dangerous growl, his black hands tensed around the mallet as though he might be considering its use on her skull.

“Stop!” Takoda said, pushing himself between them. “Kovo is not the enemy.”

“Not the enemy?” Meilin actually laughed aloud. “Tell that to the legions of Greencloaks who died trying to protect Erdas. Tell that to Tarik, and Barlow, and *my father*.”

“And *my family* ... ” Takoda said. “You’re not the only one who’s lost something.” He looked back at the gorilla, his expression torn between anger and empathy. “I know Kovo’s done wicked things. But he’s fighting a bigger war—one older than the Greencloaks. Kovo is no friend of humanity, but we all share a common enemy in the Wurm. And he’s sacrificed more than any of us in order to stop it. We have to trust him.”

Meilin could not believe what she was hearing. “An hour ago, you hated Kovo as much as anyone—now suddenly he’s your best friend?”

Takoda frowned. “The Kovo you battled at the Evertree is gone. When I summoned him as a spirit animal, he had no choice but to see the world through human eyes—at least a little bit. You don’t have to trust him, but you should trust me.” Takoda stared at her, his eyes wide and pleading. “What do you say?”

Meilin eyed the iron mallet clasped in the gorilla’s huge hand. “So it has something to do with that mallet. What are we supposed to do with it? Whack the Wurm on the head?” Her gaze moved past Kovo toward the window, which looked out into the center of the city.

Which looked out to the bell tower.

It really was an enormous structure. Its base was covered with pillars and round platforms. In the dim light, they almost looked like stone cogs and pistons—parts of some ancient machine.

“The bell tower,” she said. “That’s the trigger for the weapon, isn’t it?”

Kovo blinked, his face screwed up. He looked annoyed, but not at her. After a moment, he made a few hand gestures, which Takoda was able to translate.

“It is not a weapon like you’re thinking. It’s more like a trap ... and even that word isn’t quite right. He keeps talking about the tides.... ”

“So we’re meant to *drown* the Wurm?” Meilin said, struggling to follow. “I’d think a creature able to destroy all of Erdas could swim.”

Kovo shook his great head and gestured again, growing more frustrated.

“That’s not right, either,” Takoda said. “It’s ... it’s Erdas. Erdas will stop the Wyrms.” Takoda shook his head, struggling to keep pace with Kovo’s gestures. “It’s too complicated to explain. But I think I know how these ruins are meant to work.” He pointed out the window. “There are two towers—one here, and the other where your friends are—and they’re connected by a tunnel that runs right through the heart of Erdas. When the bell is rung, the towers will be activated and the trap will be set into motion.”

Meilin nodded vaguely. “So we need to ring the bell to spring the trap?” She looked out the window toward the middle of the city, at the bell tower that rose above the rest of the buildings. “That explains why Kovo was so eager to protect the tower from the Many. He must have been afraid that the Many climbing all over it would damage the bell.”

Kovo nodded and made more gestures to his human partner.

Takoda watched, his eyes following the quickly moving hands. It seemed to Meilin that since communing with Kovo through Mulop, the boy was better at understanding his spirit animal’s gestures. “Until the Wyrms hatch,” Takoda said, “it’s our job to protect that tower from the Many. If the Wyrms learn of our plan ahead of time, it might try to destroy the tower before it can be activated.”

Meilin leaned against a giant urn of spiced truffle oil and blew a strand of hair from her face. “Let’s just hope we don’t die of hunger before the moment arrives. Or boredom.” Waiting might have been something a monk like Takoda could do, but Meilin was a warrior, a person of action. She felt Jhi place an understanding paw on her foot. The panda, it seemed, knew Meilin’s discomfort.

She heard a sharp bark as Briggan appeared at the top of the stairs. The wolf had remained with Conor below for the conversation, but was now pawing at the floor, whining.

“Something’s wrong,” Takoda said, already moving. “I think he wants us to go downstairs.”

Meilin grabbed her staff and followed after them. Briggan was growling, and his fur had bristled along his back—he looked frightened. As soon as

Meilin reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw why.

In the corner of the room was a pile of worn rope.

And no Conor.

“Conor,” she said, her heart pounding in her ear. “He’s gone.”

Takoda, Kovo, and Jhi were soon at her side. They looked in every corner of the room and double-checked the door, which was still barred from the inside.

“He must have climbed out through the window,” she said, peering out into the streets below. “If he survived the fall.”

“Have you noticed something else?” Takoda said, standing beside her. “The streets—they’ve all gone dark.”

Takoda was right. The barrier of glowstones that they had placed around the perimeter had all been extinguished.

“And if the lights are out,” Meilin said, “then the Many could be anywhere.”

Meilin inched back from the window as she heard a gargling hiss from just outside. The pale hand of what might have once been a woman appeared on the open sill, her fingernails cracked and black. The creature reached up another hand and pulled herself over the windowsill, peering into the darkness. She snarled at Meilin and Takoda.

Meilin already had her quarterstaff in her hand, and she swung it at the woman with such force that her head snapped back with a violent jerk. The creature snarled and gave a choked howl as her body fell from the window and plummeted to the ground below.

Meilin and Takoda raced back to the window, peering down to the streets. In the glowing light of the Evertree, they could just make out the broken body of the creature, dragging herself along the pavement.

“We need light,” Meilin said, and ran to the bag that they’d managed to salvage from the *Meleager*. Inside was a small ball resembling a soft nut—one of only three they had left. Meilin hurled the nut out the open window onto the street below. The ball struck the ground and splattered phosphorescent milky goo in every direction. Eerie pinkish light filled the

street, and in that light they could see dozens of the Many teeming in the streets, climbing on top of one another, all moving toward the bell tower.

The Many snarled, recoiling from the flash of light, which was already beginning to fade. Meilin stared at their hideous faces, skin drawn tight on their sharp bones. On each forehead she could see the rotting purple spiral of the parasite that had infected them. The Many were all bald, and their clothes, if they had any, were rotted rags.

All but one of them, who moved at the front of the line. His yellow hair looked dark in the shadows, and over his shoulders hung a tattered green cloak. Unlike the others, who howled and hid from the glowstone, he marched right to the light and, removing his cloak, laid the fabric over the splattered goo, dimming it so the others could continue their charge toward the Wurm. The boy remained where he was, staring up at the lighthouse—staring straight at Meilin.

Briggan gave a sharp whine, pushing his muzzle into Meilin's sleeve. She stared at the boy below, whose figure was now only the ghost of a shadow. But even that glimpse had been long enough to confirm her fear.

“Conor,” she said, stepping back, her heart throbbing in her chest. “He’s raised an army against us.”



MARCH OF THE MANY

CONOR DIDN'T REMEMBER HOW HE HAD MANAGED TO escape his bonds in the lighthouse. Judging from the throbbing pain running up his arm, he thought he must have dislocated a thumb in the process.

The pain, however, didn't matter. Nor did the hunger gnawing in his stomach. Or the cold chill of the air without his cloak.

All that mattered was the Wyrm.

Conor had to reach the city square. He knew something, something about the bell tower in the middle of the city. Something about it was a threat to the Wyrm. He didn't understand how he knew this. He only knew that anything that tried to stop him would fall at his hand.

This would be a difficult journey—something or someone might try to stop him. For that reason, he had taken pains to extinguish the glowstone lamps set throughout the city. The light bothered his eyes, but not nearly as much as the others, who were burned by the light as though by fire. He knew that if he could darken those lights, he would soon have a legion at his side.

And so it was. No sooner had the first glowstone been shattered than he could sense his brethren skittering out from the shadows to join him. He could hear their heartbeats, beating with his own—steady and strong. He

could see that they suffered just as he did—they were tormented with their desire to follow the Wyrms' command. And he could help lead them.

They were all children of the Wyrms.

Truly, it was a feeling of peace. The calm that comes from one finally accepting his place in the world. His whole life, Conor had been torn between duty and desire—always playing the meek shepherd, even when he wanted so much more. And now, at last, the Wyrms had called to him, had chosen *him*. And with that call came a promise of something so powerful, so pure, that he knew he would die if he could not touch it.

But even as he staggered over the cracked stone streets, moving toward the middle of the city, he felt another pull. He had a vague unease echoing in the deepest parts of his mind. A mournful baying—like the howling of a wolf—that seemed to tell him that what he was doing was wrong. That the Wyrms were dangerous. That he had to stop it before it was too late.

But that sound was faint in comparison to his own throbbing heart, which beat like a drum, compelling him to march forward. Conor's dark eyes slid to the hundreds of others walking beside him. How could so many souls be wrong? And when he finally reached the Wyrms, he knew that voice would be silenced at last.

"Conor!" a voice cried out in the darkness before him. It was not a voice in his head, but a real voice. It was the voice of a girl.

There was a flash of wincing light, which sent the others into hiding. Conor remained where he was. The light revealed their path—the path that led directly to the bell tower in the middle of the city—and it was blocked by two children and three beasts. The girl who had called to him was standing in the middle of the group. She wore a green cloak and held a long staff. Conor thought her name might be Meilin, and then he wondered how he knew that.

"Conor," the girl said, her body crouched like one preparing to fight. "You have to stop. You don't know what you're doing. You're being controlled by the Wyrms. You need to resist its power."

Conor felt his entire body flood with nauseous hatred as he recalled who these people were. These were interlopers. His former friends, who had

held him captive in the tower, tied at the wrists and ankles. They had tried to keep him from the Wyrms. And now they were blocking his path.

These are my enemiessss, a voice said in his mind. It was a deep, pulsing voice that seemed to reverberate through his very bones. A voice that spoke without actual words in a language even older than the stars. A voice of limitless power.

Protecttt mee, the voice said.

Protecttt mee, and killll them.



MEILIN HAD NO REAL WAY OF KNOWING HOW TO STOP what was coming. They were two children and three spirit animals against an army of hundreds—maybe even thousands. The last time they had encountered the Many in Phos Astos, they had barely escaped with their lives. And now they were somehow supposed to defeat them in battle, with one of her closest friends leading the opposite charge.

She stared at Conor shuffling toward her, his lifeless eyes glossy and dark. The boy she knew was barely recognizable.

“Conor!” she called again. “You have to fight the Wyrms! Resist its call!”

If Conor heard her plea, it did not show on his face. That was perhaps a blessing. Conor had fought countless battles at Meilin’s side. He knew her weaknesses as a fighter, and he could certainly exploit them. Already he had shown himself cunning enough to extinguish the lights around the main square—enabling the Many to come to his side.

She wondered whether he had overheard any of their conversation at the lighthouse. How much did he know about Kovo’s plan? And if Conor knew, did the Wyrms know as well?

Meilin felt a shiver in the air that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Briggan whined, his hackles raised, as though hearing the cry of

an unheard song. Jhi, who was beside Meilin, seemed similarly agitated.

The Many had also stopped their approach, all of them tilting their heads up toward the Wyrms, which pulsed above the city like an oozing black sun.

“What’s happening?” Meilin said, adjusting her grip on her staff. “Why did they all stop?”

Kovo made a gesture beside her, which Takoda translated. “The Wyrms,” the boy said. “It’s speaking to them.”

She stared overhead at the pulsing polyp that was the Wyrms’s egg. Through the crack in its shell, she could see a red light glowing. The red light opened, like an eye, rolling back and forth and blinking. The egg shuddered, as if whatever was inside was struggling to break free.

“It’s waking up,” Meilin said.

The Many, all of whom had been distracted by the Wyrms’s movement, turned their attention back to the street. Their pale faces were twisted with animal hatred. Conor raised a thin finger, pointing toward Meilin. With a hideous, inhuman roar, the Many rushed past him and charged toward Meilin and Takoda, hands outstretched like claws.

Briggan bared his teeth, growling. Even Jhi seemed ready to head-butt whoever might approach.

Meilin knelt low, preparing for the first assault. She grunted, swinging her staff upward with a jaw-breaking *crack* against the face of her first opponent—a man in the ragged robes of a Sadrean elder. The man flew backward, falling to the ground.

With so many coming, there was hardly time to breathe, let alone change footing. Meilin brought her staff down without pausing, bashing a Sadrean boy who looked even younger than Takoda. A moment later, both the boy and the elder were trampled under the feet of the Many who had taken their place.

Takoda fought beside her with more passion than skill. In a surprising display of strength, he swung Kovo’s iron mallet over his head and brought it down with a terrible *crunch*. The mallet weighed nearly as much as the boy, and his swing was strong enough to topple a trio of the Many, who flew backward, unconscious.

Briggan had managed to fell half a dozen already. Meilin could not take time to note whether or not the injuries the wolf inflicted with his jaws were fatal. Nor could she contemplate how she might feel if they were.

Meilin rolled across the ground, knocking out a man who very nearly managed to grab Takoda from behind. She felt a slithering sense of horror as she realized that one of the Wyrms' parasites had managed to attach itself to her neck. She ripped the thing off and flung it into the shadows.

"Get to higher ground!" she called out, springing to her feet. "We need to rekindle those glowstones and keep them at bay." She leaped backward to some fallen rubble on the blockade.

Jhi, meanwhile, had taken it upon herself to amble directly into the fray and lead off a faction of the Many, who pursued the panda with blind fury. Meilin watched from her new height as Jhi led them straight off the edge of a rocky ledge that opened into a deep well below. Dozens of the Many followed Jhi into the water, sputtering and splashing to keep from drowning.

Meilin grinned and touched her arm. A moment later, Jhi's mark appeared on her flesh. She pressed it again and Jhi appeared at her side, soaking wet and looking quite proud. "Nice work!" she said. "Care to try it again?" Jhi scrambled down from the barrier to lead off another group of the Many. Meilin watched her spirit animal rush headlong into danger, marveling at how she could have ever doubted the Great Panda's courage.

Meilin kicked her boot at the hand of a grasping man who looked like he was some kind of warrior. She brought her staff down on another, a woman who might have been beautiful if she hadn't been pale and hairless.

The Many were not strong, but they fought with absolutely no regard to personal safety, which made them relentless in their assault. However many Meilin knocked down, twice that number appeared a moment later. The fight was made even more difficult by the fact that the only light available was from the silvery roots of the Evertree. Meilin was battling an army of shadows.

"How are those glowstones coming?" Meilin shouted to Takoda, who was somewhere behind her.

“Gone!” he cried. “Conor shattered them all. We’re out of light.”

“That’s just perfect!” Meilin said, ducking as Briggan leaped over her head to attack an approaching Sadrean. She recalled that Jhi was somewhere in the city, having led off another group of the Many. She had forgotten all about her! When she summoned Jhi into passive state, and then to her side, she saw that the panda’s right haunch was red with blood. “Stay close to me,” she whispered. “You’ve done more than enough.”

Meilin scanned the slack faces before her, looking for Conor. Searching farther down the street, she saw that the boy had not charged the barrier with the others but had instead climbed up to the top of a small footbridge.

From there, he was now directing the rest of the Many like a general—pointing straight at the bell tower.

“Conor’s leading an assault against the tower!” she called. “We have to stop him.”

Meilin wished she had the ability to throw something far enough to knock Conor from his perch. She looked around for Kovo, but the gorilla was nowhere to be found.

“Takoda!” she cried. “Can you summon Kovo? We could really use an extra pair of fists right about now!” Kovo had single-handedly fought back the Many at Phos Astos.

“I’m trying, but it’s not working!” Takoda shouted, wrenching his mallet free from a man who had grabbed hold of the handle. “He ran inside the lighthouse, telling me to seek shelter!”

“Seek shelter?” Meilin said, taking out a pale-faced old woman with a roundhouse kick. “Now’s not really the time for retreat!” Even as she said this, she could feel Jhi’s muzzle on her side, pushing her backward toward one of the crevices in their stone barricade. “What are you doing?!” she shouted, tripping over the back of her cloak and falling onto flat stone.

But then, up above her, she saw a dark figure standing atop the roof of the lighthouse. It was Kovo, and he was holding an enormous clay urn over his head—one of dozens that he had been collecting from all across the city over the last few days. A curl of black smoke leaked out from the mouth of the jar.

“Get back!” Meilin cried, her eyes widening.

With an earthshaking roar, the Great Gorilla hurled the urn toward the street below. It struck the ground with a crash as it burst into a ball of red flames.

The Many howled in pain at both the light and the heat as the fire raged in the street—scattering them in all directions. But Meilin’s sense of triumph was over as soon as it had sparked when she looked to the bridge where Conor had been standing only a moment before—now a pile of burning rubble.

Briggan whined beside her and made to leap into the flames. Meilin grabbed his scruff, stopping him from finding his human companion. “You can’t!” she cried. “We need you here.”

The ruined city echoed with the moans of the Many as they scrambled to reach the shore and douse the flames that had engulfed their bodies. Already Kovo had raised another urn over his head. It came down with an explosion even bigger than the last, sending the horde even farther back.

Meilin scrambled to her feet, feeling a new hope swelling in her breast. There were at least twenty urns of oil in their tower—enough to build a flaming barrier around the middle of the city. That might at least buy them time to rest and recover, until they formed a new plan.

“We need to use the flames to create a perimeter around the bell tower—to cut them off from approaching.” She turned to Takoda. “Run. Tell Kovo to throw one urn at every major inroad.”

Her hope in victory, however, was short-lived. Meilin heard a snarl at her feet, and she glanced down just in time to see a black hand burst from the rubble and grab her ankle. “Ahhh!” she cried, as the hand pulled her toward the flames below. Meilin grabbed her staff and brought it down—so hard that it snapped in half against her attacker’s head. Her assailant, however, was undeterred. He grabbed her with his other hand, pulling her closer to the consuming flames. And when Meilin looked upon his face, the fight went out of her.

“Conor,” she whispered, for indeed it was. He stared at her with his dead-dark eyes, his skin charred and burned. The parasite burrowed into his

brow was pulsing—it throbbed just beneath the skin like a second heart.

With a roar, Conor flung Meilin aside—showing more strength than she knew him to possess. It must have been the power of the Wyrms coursing through his veins.

Briggan growled and charged Conor, biting down on the boy's leg and pulling him away from Meilin. Conor stumbled down to his knees without crying out, kicking and fighting to get free of the wolf's jaws. But the damage had already been done. With Meilin and Briggan so distracted, there was nothing to stop the charge of the Many clambering up and over the flaming barricade. Despite the excruciating pain of the flames, these mindless captives were undeterred, using their own bodies to smother the fire so that those behind them might continue their assault.

Meilin felt Jhi beside her, tending to the burns on her leg where Conor had grabbed her. She watched, helpless, as hundreds of the Many charged straight through the flames, flowing into the center of the city.

Kovo hurled more urns in a desperate bid to stop them from reaching the spire, but it was useless. The Many cared not for their lives. They clawed at stones and bricks and bannisters—trying to rip the bell tower apart with their bare hands.

“It's over.” Meilin felt the sting of smoke in her eyes as she blinked away hot tears. They had traveled all this way, sacrificed so much, only to fail in their task. And in that failure would come the destruction of all of Erdas. She clung to Jhi, burying her face in the panda's warm fur. “There's just too many of them.”

“Well then,” said a voice beside her, “maybe we should even the odds?” Meilin looked up to see Takoda, who, despite being covered with bruises and burns, was breathless and wide-eyed. “I think our prayers have been answered.”

Before Meilin could ask him what he meant, she heard a shrill whining sound out in the distance. It was coming from the direction of the water. Meilin stood, recalling that piercing cry, which she had only heard twice before, while defending the walls of Phos Astos from the Many.

“Screamers,” she said, speaking the name of the peculiar mushrooms that the Sadreans had used to defend their perimeters.

The sound was even louder now, so loud that the Many took leave of their work in the city square and turned toward the water—from which direction shone a dazzling pinkish light that cut sharp shadows across the streets. Meilin stood and shielded her eyes from the glare. At the water, she could see a dozen galley ships riding the dark waves to shore—all of them bearing enormous glowstones at the helm to light their paths. On the decks stood dozens of Sadrean soldiers, all of them wearing glittering crystalline armor and holding crystal swords and axes.

Even at this distance, Meilin could see the glint of determination burning in their pink eyes. And there, at the front of the prow, the small figure of a girl bearing a long spear. The girl’s face was hidden behind a crystal helm, but Meilin could see clearly enough the glowing paw print showing on the breast of her tunic—a mark that Kovo himself had given her after their first battle in Phos Astos. “It can’t be,” Meilin whispered.

“It’s her,” Takoda said, the smile nearly splitting his face. “It’s Xanthe.”



XANTHE RETURNS

HAVING BEEN RAISED IN A MONASTERY, TAKODA HAD been taught to see tiny miracles in the world. But these were always small things. A rainbow cast off the glint of a dewy spiderweb. The first cry of a newborn babe. The music of a stream as it rippled by.

In this moment, however, as Takoda looked out past the rippling flames and saw Xanthe's face approaching from the sea, he finally understood what it was to behold a *real* miracle.

"She's alive," he said, barely able to form the words.

"And more important," Meilin said, standing beside him, "she's brought an army!"

Already the ships had reached the shore, and soldiers were racing down the gangplanks and into the city streets, weapons raised. The Many had greater numbers, but the Sadreans were well-armored and fierce. They fought with the might of a population that had survived the crucible of battle, only to emerge with newly forged strength. Xanthe herself fought as bravely as any of them, using her crystal spear to impale the Many who got in her way.

"Xanthe!" Takoda shouted, running to the top of a smoldering staircase and waving both arms over his head. "Over here!"

Xanthe turned her head and saw him. The girl's face broke into an astonished smile. There was a glint in her pink eyes that made Takoda's heart beat out of his chest. "You're alive!" she shouted, racing to meet him.

"I can't believe you found us!" he exclaimed. "How did you survive the Webmother?"

Xanthe shrugged. "I'm a Sadrean wanderling. Surviving the tunnels is what I do best." She was breathing hard from the fighting. "Besides," she said, looking down to the ground, "I thought you might miss me."

Takoda's mouth fell open. He didn't know what to say in response. There was something about the way Xanthe had said this that made him think maybe she felt the same way about him as he felt about her. "I ... um ... " He swallowed, his cheeks flushing.

Takoda was saved, as it were, by an interruption in the form of a loud crash. The battle was still raging around them, and hundreds of the Many had broken through the flames and were now scaling the side of the bell tower, tearing at the stonework and buttressing. They had just succeeded in breaking the masonry around one of the tower's lower turrets, which had fallen free from the main tower and crashed to the ground.

A huge cloud of dust filled the air. Takoda coughed, reaching out a hand to steady himself. His fingers found what he realized too late was Xanthe's hand. "S-sorry!" he stammered, pulling away. "I—I—I couldn't see."

"Then you should stay close," he heard Xanthe say, and the next moment he felt her hand take his own, their fingers entwining between one another. Takoda found himself grateful that the dust obscured his cheeks, which had begun shining brighter than any glowstone.

"Enough chatting," Meilin said, appearing in the thinning dust. "We have to stop the Many from destroying that bell tower." She crouched and swept her staff across the ground—tripping a flaming man on his way toward the city square.

"That tower is part of Kovo's plan to stop the Wyrms," Takoda explained to Xanthe. "If it falls, we're lost."

Xanthe stepped away from Takoda and raised a sort of horn made from a hollowed-out mushroom. She blew into one end, releasing a battle cry.

“Protect the tower!” she cried. Soldiers streamed past her, running to the center of the city. They fought with determination and fury, cutting through the mob and forming a tight circle around the edge of the tower.

The Many were defenseless against the glowing crystalline blades of the Sadreans. Every cut seemed to scald the very flesh of those infected by the parasites—causing them to collapse to the ground, clutching their wounds as though they had been burned.

When the base of the tower had been secured, a small troop of white-haired slingmaidens positioned themselves on the remaining turrets, and they used the slings to launch glowstones on the Many below, driving them back into the shadows.

When the last of the Many had been vanquished, the Sadreans let out an enormous ululating cry that echoed in the caverns below. The sound was so strong that it made the roots overhead tremble, which in turn made Takoda tremble.

Conor, who had fought even more fiercely than the other Many, had finally been restrained by two burly Sadrean shieldwardens. They bound his arms behind his back and brought him to Meilin and Takoda. Briggan remained by their friend’s side, while Jhi moved between the Sadreans, tending to their wounds as best she could.

“We only found the city just in time,” Xanthe said, running to meet Takoda. “If those yellow flames had not appeared on the horizon, we might have gone off course and impaled our ships into the stalagmite reefs.”

Takoda smiled, turning toward his spirit animal, who had positioned himself at the mouth of the tower—his great fists clutching the iron mallet, his small eyes trained on the Wyrms overhead. “The fire was Kovo’s idea. He used it to drive back the Many.” He shot Meilin a look. “Maybe you should thank him for saving our lives?” He still remembered the harsh things she had said about Kovo back in the lighthouse.

“I’ll thank him when this is over,” Meilin said darkly. She was still watching Conor, who seemed to have calmed down. The boy stared back at Meilin with empty, wrathful eyes. “Keeping this tower safe is only the beginning of this fight.”

Xanthe stepped away from Takoda and knelt in front of Conor. “I’d assumed that you had abandoned him when he turned too far. That you carried him with you, even like this ... ” She looked down, and Takoda felt a pang of guilt. It was Xanthe who had been abandoned. And it had been his fault.

Conor gave a sharp snarl, lunging for Xanthe. The girl screamed, falling backward. The Sadrean shieldwardens kept him in place, but it was clear that something had happened to set him off. The possessed boy lurched up from the ground. All traces of the modest shepherd Takoda had first met in Nilo had vanished. Now he looked almost as inhuman as the Many. Conor snarled and hissed, staring upward with his dark eyes.

Briggan whined, backing away from his human partner.

“What’s Conor doing?” Meilin said.

“Whatever he’s doing, he’s not alone.” Xanthe pointed toward the shadowy city. “Look.”

Takoda peered past the glowstone perimeter and saw that the surviving Many had emerged from the shadows, their long teeth flashing in the dim light as they all opened their mouths and made a sort of moaning sound. But they were no longer looking at the Sadrean army, or even the bell tower.

They were all staring upward, their long, bonelike fingers outstretched, swaying backward. The sounds of their moaning had a droning, almost hypnotic quality to it—like some sort of chant. Takoda couldn’t help but think of the evening songs at his monastery.

A shivering *hssssss* echoed through the darkness. Takoda looked up toward the egg, which was shaking and shuddering, trying to work its way free of the Evertree’s roots. He heard a snapping sound as one of the thicker roots broke loose.

Rocks and dirt fell from the cavern ceiling, along with another huge snarl of root. It flopped to the floor, limp and dead—the silver glow already fading from it.

Takoda hadn’t just heard the root breaking—he had *felt* it. The moment it happened, he gasped, staggering back. It was as though the very breath had been ripped from his chest. Meilin, too, seemed to have been similarly

afflicted. She recovered and quickly placed Jhi into passive state—as if to fortify the spirit bond that had suddenly come under assault. Takoda tried to do the same, touching the place on his throat where Kovo dwelled in passive state, but the skin remained clammy and cold.

Kovo felt as distant from him as a stranger.

Another tendril of the Evertree’s roots snapped, and this time the Wurm’s egg dropped several feet—its weight apparently too much for the young roots to bear. The egg thrashed and swung as whatever lived inside struggled to free itself.

The Many were now howling and shrieking, all reaching toward the Wurm, all begging for it to free itself. Conor was howling with them, twisting his body and trying to get free of his restraints.

“Stay back!” Meilin cried, pulling Takoda and Xanthe clear of Conor’s gnashing teeth. “Give him some space.”

Kovo lumbered past her, right to Conor, and gave the boy a “tap” on the side of the head with the flat end of his mallet. The boy fell back to the ground—unconscious but otherwise unharmed. The Great Ape then turned toward Meilin and made a smug gesture with his hands: “Problem solved.”

“Takoda!” Meilin snapped. “Get control of your spirit animal. Tell him if he touches my friend again, I’ll make sure he lives to regret it.”

“We’ve got bigger problems,” Takoda said, his eyes fixed on the egg overhead. “The Wurm is coming.”



Meilin stared at the Wyrms, unable to look away. More roots from the Evertree had snapped loose, and now the egg was hanging by a single thread. The egg itself was swinging and thrashing, as whatever was inside fought to free itself from the roots. Black ooze dripped from the large crack in the shell. Takoda could see dark and slimy tendrils moving between the fissures, writhing and twitching. Then the tendrils slid back, and he saw the red eye of the Wyrms, huge and searching.

Meilin heard a groaning sound as the last strand of the Evertree's roots snapped and the egg finally broke free. It fell down to the ground, landing with an earthshaking shudder.

Rubble and smoke burst into the air. Meilin fell to one side, trying her best to protect Jhi from falling rubble. In the chaos, all she could hear were the snarls of the Many. And then above that, a new sound. A low, gurgling hiss that seemed to slither right up her spine and land in the back of her teeth.

As the dust cleared, Meilin rose and stared at the place where the egg had fallen. There was a dent in the stone floor from the impact. The shell had cracked open and now lay in several pieces. Black ooze seeped out

from the spot, spreading across the ground in greedy little rivulets. And there, in the middle of it all, lay a roiling black knot of slick tendrils.

The arms—there must have been a dozen of them—slithered and flailed, pulling themselves apart like a knot untying itself. At the center of these was the Wyrm. The head—if you could call it a head—was somewhere in the middle of its enormous body. The thing blinked its red eyes—Meilin counted at least four—and then opened what must have been its mouth. It was a hideous, leechlike ring of razor-sharp teeth that seemed to flex and twist as it moved. The Wyrm let out a hoarse screech.

Meilin clutched her staff. “It’s ... like something from a nightmare.”

She had been expecting to see a creature that looked like a lizard or salamander, or maybe even a snake, but the Wyrm did not appear so simple. Its movements were so fluid that it was difficult to grasp its full shape. Staring at it, Meilin was reminded of the way oil shifted and slid across the surface of water.

The appearance of the Wyrm seemed to have made an impact on the Many, who rushed closer to the glowstones—now unafraid of the searing light. They were all staring at the bell tower—at Meilin and her friends. The Wyrm was also facing them, its four eyes narrowed into hateful red slits. It screeched again, and the Many all charged through the perimeter—straight for the tower.

“Like I said,” Meilin said, rotating her staff into a fighting position, “we’ve got a long way to go.”

“Incoming!” Xanthe shouted, and then sounded the attack on her horn. “Brace for impact.”

But trying to brace for this attack was like trying to stand up against the crashing tide. The Many hit them like a wave of claws and teeth—sweeping Sadrean fighters right off their feet as they rushed past. The Wyrm’s army moved with a possessed fury—driven on by the shrieks of their master. Screams rang out as the Many grabbed hold of Sadrean soldiers and dragged them to the Wyrm as live offerings.

“Into the tower!” Meilin screamed, falling back with the others. She and Xanthe tried to close the iron doors, but they burst apart from the force of

the frenzied mob. Meilin and Xanthe leaped back from the door and raced up the curved staircase, taking the steps two at a time. The Many were right behind them, hissing and clawing and snarling—climbing on top of one another to reach their prey.

Meilin brought Jhi into passive state to keep her safe. Briggan ran in front, attacking the few Many that had climbed in through the windows. Kovo had an unconscious Conor slung over one shoulder. Even with one hand, the Great Beast fought like a titan, grabbing the creatures and flinging them out open windows like rag dolls.

The entire tower shuddered and groaned as the horde began scaling the walls outside, tearing apart anything they could get ahold of. Meilin heard a scream as one of the slingmaidens was wrestled from her turret and thrown to the ground below—another offering for the Wyrms.

“Keep moving!” Meilin shouted. She felt like her heart would burst from running. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to climb even faster. They had to reach that bell before the tower came down on top of them.

At last she staggered onto the platform at the top of the tower. Briggan and Xanthe were close behind her. The huge iron bell hung in the middle of the room. Glowing moss covered the outside. This bell had been silent for thousands of years—waiting for this moment.

“Take care of the bell!” Meilin screamed to Kovo as she assumed a low position with her staff. “We’ll hold the stairs.”

Kovo dropped Conor and leaped clear over her head, landing behind her with a crash. He stomped toward the waiting bell, heaving the iron mallet over his head—

But then, he stopped.

The Great Beast gasped, stumbling backward as if he’d been pierced by some invisible blade. He lurched to one side. The iron mallet slid from his grasp and clunked to the floor.

“This is your chance, Kovo!” Meilin shouted over her shoulder. “What are you waiting for?!”

But the ape did not hear her. He had staggered away from the bell toward the window. Meilin saw that Xanthe had stopped fighting, too. She

and Kovo were both staring outside.

Meilin grunted, kicking back a possessed Sadrean girl who was clawing at her boot. She ran to the window. The moment she got there, she knew what had stopped Kovo and Xanthe. She saw the Wyrms writhing and shrieking at the foot of the tower—the ground around it was littered with the corpses of its prey. And clasped in one of its oozing tentacles was a small boy with dark hair, screaming for his very life.

“The Wyrms,” Meilin whispered. “It’s got Takoda.”



IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR TAKODA, XANTHE WOULD BE dead.

When Xanthe had first met Takoda in the caverns above Phos Astos, she thought him funny, if a little exotic. He was small, weak, and gentle. It was clear that he had no place among Meilin and the Greencloaks. When Xanthe learned that this quiet young monk was the human partner to the great Kovo she nearly laughed aloud.

But Xanthe soon realized that Takoda was nothing to laugh about. There was a strength to that boy, who could say more with a silent look than most people could with a thousand songs.

When Xanthe had been lost in the burned-out remnants of the Arachane Fields, alone and defenseless, it had been Takoda who kept her alive. She knew that she *had* to see him again—to make sure he was okay. She was afraid what might happen to him if she couldn't be there to help protect him from the Wurm. And that fear had given her the strength to survive.

She had kept the sound of Takoda's voice in her mind as she wandered through the dark tunnels, without so much as a glowstone to find her way, until she finally stumbled into an intact Sadrean outpost—full of living, breathing, uninfected survivors.

In trying to save Takoda, Takoda had saved her.

Xanthe had continued thinking of him as she rallied those survivors and told them of the return of the Great Ape. Takoda was first in her thoughts as she led their fleet across the Sulfur Sea. And when the ships finally reached the ruined shore, and she saw Takoda's face amid the flames and rubble—the sight of him somehow opened up a part of her that she didn't even realize existed. It was as if she could see all of Erdas—the aboveground world she had only dreamed of—shining in his dark eyes.

And now, after all that struggle and pain, Takoda was about to die.

At first, Xanthe hadn't realized that Takoda had not made it into the tower with Meilin and the others. But when she heard his screams echoing up from the battlefield, she realized her error. She had abandoned him to die among the Many—to die as an offering to that oozing nightmare of tentacles and eyes and teeth that the elders called the Wyrms.

From the high window, she could now see the boy grasped in one of the Wyrms' arms. It was coiled around his body, crushing the life out of him. The Wyrms raised Takoda over its hideous mouth—its hundreds of drooling teeth twitching in anticipation of its next meal. Takoda dangled upside down, his face pale and bloodless, his gaze wide with terror and shock. His eyes looked upward, straight into hers.

For a moment all the sound seemed to vanish from the world. All Xanthe could hear was the dull throbbing of her own heartbeat.

“Takoda!” she shouted from the balcony. She slung her spear across her back and started to climb over the edge. “I'm coming!”

But before she could even put one leg over the railing, she was knocked to one side by Kovo. The Great Beast let out a terrifying roar and charged for the window. He dropped one knuckle down and leaped clean over the stone banister, sailing through the darkness and landing on the ground far below with a tremendous *crash!*

Kovo was on his feet again in a heartbeat, swinging his fists wildly as he bounded toward the Wyrms—sending the Many and the Sadreans alike scattering in all directions.

Xanthe had seen Kovo fight once before in Phos Astos, but that was nothing compared to what she witnessed now. The ape roared and lunged

for the Wyrms, hurtling toward the creature with both fists drawn over his head.

The Wyrms, sensing the approach, flung Takoda to one side and raised its tentacles. Kovo's body hit it with the force of a cannonball, and the two of them spiraled backward across the ground, smashing clean through the wall of a building.

Xanthe's eyes scanned the teeming chaos below, searching for Takoda's body. But it was impossible to see from up here. She slung her spear over her shoulder. "We have to get Takoda," she said.

Meilin's hand grabbed her arm. "Don't you dare leave me up here!"

Xanthe turned around to see that the entire belfry had been overrun by the Many. Possessed Sadreans were swarming the bell and were trying to rip it free of its yoke. Briggan snarled and snapped, pulling them away with his jaws.

"That bell is the weapon," Meilin said. She swung her staff, knocking back an attacker who was trying to climb over the edge of the railing. "We have to ring it before the Many tear it to pieces."

"But Takoda's down there!" Xanthe yelled.

"Takoda can wait," Meilin said, kicking a hissing assailant square in the jaw. "This is war." Her voice was cold and without emotion, and Xanthe wondered just how much war this girl had seen in her lifetime. "Our mission is to stop that Wyrms before it can find a host. This tower won't stand much longer." She knelt down and wrapped her hands around the handle of the iron mallet. The thing was enormous—almost as big as she was. "Help me."

Xanthe tore herself from the window and grabbed the handle. She and Meilin both lifted at the same time, and the mallet's head rose from the ground. They carried it toward the bell—gaining speed as they moved. Acting as one, she and Meilin swung the mallet over their heads and—



WHAT LIES BENEATH

CLANGGGGG!!

The sound was almost deafening in Meilin’s ears. The possessed Sadreans that had been clinging to the bell instantly fell away. The chime echoed and reverberated across the city, growing louder and louder.

Meilin staggered back with Xanthe, letting go of the mallet, which fell to the floor with a heavy thud. They had done it—the trap was sprung.

“What happens now?” Xanthe asked her.

Meilin shook her head. “I have no idea.”

But it was clear that *something* was happening. The entire tower was trembling. Rubble sprinkled down on her as the platform—no, the entire structure—began to slowly rotate. Screams rang out from the ground below. Meilin ran to the window, Xanthe right behind her.

The ground was changing beneath them. The floor in the center of the city was drawing back like the folds of a paper fan to expose a dark chasm below. The Sadreans and the Many screamed, running to safety around the edges of the town.

“The ground is opening up around us,” Meilin said.

That wasn’t all the bell was doing. Meilin could feel something happening inside her—it felt like her stomach was turning inside out. She

staggered to one side, suddenly unable to stand. She touched her tattoo to summon Jhi, but when the panda appeared at her side she, too, was showing the same symptoms. Meilin's vision blurred—like she was seeing two different things at once. It was almost like she could see herself outside of her own body.

Meilin and Jhi weren't the only ones. Briggan was whining over Conor's unconscious body, pawing at the boy.

"What's happening to you?" she heard Xanthe say.

"The snare," Meilin said through gritted teeth. "It's doing something to our spirit bonds." It felt like her whole body was dissolving with every breath.

She pulled herself to her knees and stared over the window railing. The tower was still turning slowly in the middle of the chasm, and it made her motion sick to stare at the ground below. She glimpsed Kovo staggering through the chaos. Red blood flowed from the Great Beast's body where the Wyrms' teeth had cut him. The ape stumbled and swayed, struggling to remain upright.

And then she saw the Wyrms. It was hissing, writhing in pain, its movements jerky and uncontrolled. The infected Sadreans around the Wyrms had stopped moving completely, as if the breath had just gone out of them. Whatever was happening to Meilin and Jhi looked like it was also happening to the Wyrms and its minions—only on a much bigger scale. "It's working!" Meilin cried, gripping the bannister. "The Wyrms' guard is down.... This is our chance ... to kill it.... "

But then, with a sharp jolt, the tower stopped moving. Meilin lurched to one side, nearly falling to the floor. She heard a groaning sound as the gears deep within the tower walls strained against something that was blocking their motion. It shuddered and then stopped altogether. "No!" Meilin said, scrambling to her feet. "Keep going!" She kicked the iron bell, trying to start the mechanism, but it was useless.

The snare had stopped.

Already Meilin's head felt clearer—whatever had been happening between her and Jhi had halted along with the tower. She clenched her teeth

and struggled to stay upright. She looked to the battlefield and saw that the Wyrms had also recovered. It released a furious shriek, and the Many around it seemed to snap back to attention.

Meilin watched as the creature slithered toward the edges of the hole that had half opened up before it—the doors halted along with the tower. It reached a quivering tentacle out into the void. The tentacle flicked like the tongue of a serpent tasting the air. With a screech that seemed to echo as much in Meilin’s own mind as it did across the crumbling city, the Wyrms slithered forward and melted into the darkness.

A few of the Many leaped into the hole after their master. Their cries echoed for several seconds as their bodies plummeted down. The rest of the Many broke formation and scurried away from the light of the flames and Sadrean blades—disappearing into the darkness of the outlying tunnels.

“Is it over?” Xanthe whispered beside her.

Meilin shook her head, her eyes fixed on the bottomless hole. It seemed to plunge down straight through the heart of Erdas. “I don’t think so.” She ran her hand through Jhi’s fur, taking comfort in the warmth of her spirit animal—in the strength of the bond they shared.

Meilin heard Briggan yip behind her. The wolf was bleeding badly from his side where the Many had attacked him. Conor lay unconscious beside him, bleeding, pale, but still alive. Briggan pointed his muzzle toward the stairs and Meilin and Xanthe followed him out of the tower.

Meilin and the others stepped outside to find Kovo at the far edge of the chasm, clutching Takoda in his enormous arms like one might hold an infant.

Jhi ambled to the boy, tending to an ugly gash in his chest—the place where the Wyrms’ tentacle had pierced through him.

“Takoda!” Xanthe cried, rushing to his side. The girl took Takoda’s hand in her own. The boy’s face was gray. He had clearly lost a lot of blood.

“Is he ... ?” Meilin said, unable to form the question.

“He’s alive,” Xanthe said, her voice shaking. “Kovo saved his life.”

Meilin sighed, swallowing down her worst fears. She was glad, but also heartbroken. All this destruction, and for what? They had failed in their

mission. “We may be alive, but so is the Wyrn,” she said. “And I have a feeling it’s headed straight for Zerif.” She tried not to think of Rollan and Abeke having to face that creature. She met Kovo’s eyes. “Still. Thank you. Leaping out from the tower to save Takoda ... I didn’t think you had it in you.”

The gorilla huffed, blinking.

“The snare was working, just like you said it would,” Meilin said. “But then it stopped. What happened?”

Kovo shook his head: *I don’t know*. He made several gestures with his hand. Before Meilin could explain that she didn’t understand his signs, Takoda stirred, turning toward her. “Kovo says ... the snare is jammed.” He swallowed. “Something must have stopped it from turning ... something on the other side.”

“So just like that, it’s over?” Meilin said. She could feel her eyes welling up. “All this death. All this pain. Just so we could lose by something *getting jammed*?”

The Great Beast made a series of angry gestures—he looked as frustrated as she did about the failure of the snare. “All is not lost,” Takoda said, struggling to translate. “There is a second bell, at the place where your friends are. If they can ring it, there may be a chance.... ”

“Do they know about the bell?” Meilin said, stepping closer. “Do the others know how the snare works?”

Kovo lowered his hand, shaking his head.

“I don’t know,” Takoda said.

Meilin released a long breath, exchanging a look with Xanthe. “Well then ... let’s hope they figure it out fast ... while there’s still an Erdas to save.”



18

TO ARMS

BEING A LEADER IS OFTEN DIFFICULT. IT REQUIRES THAT you continually put the needs of others before your own desires.

When Shane was the king of Stetriol, his uncle Gar had once told him he should put his will first—rule with an iron fist. Even then—as he made some of the worst mistakes ever witnessed by the long history of Erdas—Shane had known better. It wasn't a fist that had won him the Greencloaks' talismans. Sacrifices had.

Sacrifices he now regretted.

Shane stood crouched in the icy chamber where, a moment before, he, Abeke, and Rollan had been communing with the Great Beast Kovo. The same Great Beast who had once manipulated him into collecting the talismans and conquering the world.

“Zerif's found us?” he said, clutching Niri's arm. “Are you sure?”

The girl, whose eyes had returned to a sea green color, nodded. “He's got a fleet of ships with him and he's heading this way.” Niri's spirit animal, Mulop, had already withdrawn from the chamber and was now swimming in the cold open waters. She tilted her head to one side, as though hearing a voice. “They'll be here by nightfall.”

“So soon!” Rollan muttered. “And here I was hoping we’d have a snowball fight!”

Shane stood and shot him an icy glare. “This is no time for jokes,” he said as he marched toward the main tunnel, his hand resting on the hilt of his saber.

“I disagree,” Rollan said, following after him. “This is the *perfect* time for jokes—then at least we can die with smiles on our faces!”

“Wouldn’t that require actually being funny?” Shane said, raising an eyebrow. He was gratified to see Abeke purse her lips in an attempt not to laugh at her friend. Shane turned toward the tunnel. “We have to get aboveground.”

“Wait!” Niri called after him. She was pulling herself upright at the edge of the water with her thin arms. By her strained expression, it was clear that the maneuver took all her strength. “There’s something ... I can still hear them talking in Sadre.” She swallowed. “Mulop is too weak to speak with them, but he can still hear what they’re saying to Kovo.... ”

“You can hear Meilin?” Rollan said, stepping toward her. “Is she talking about me?” He swallowed. “Or, um, Abeke? Any of us really? Forget I asked.”

Niri shook her head, screwing up her face. “They’re arguing about something. It has to do with the snare and the Wyrm and ... ” She winced and then sighed. “It’s hard to follow.”

“Keep trying,” Shane said, moving into the tunnel. “In the meantime, we need to prepare for war.”

“Um, maybe we should listen to her?” Rollan said, hanging back.

“Your girlfriend can wait!” Shane shouted, drawing his sword. “I have fifty Redcloaks up there who are depending on me to lead them. Not to mention the other Great Beast summoners. Zerif is coming, and we need every hand we can get. That includes you. Now let’s move.”

Shane knew it was a mistake to give someone like Rollan direct orders, but that didn’t seem to be the problem at the moment. Rollan was concerned with something else that he had heard.

“G-g-girlfriend?” he stammered, his cheeks turning crimson. “Who said anything about that?”

Shane rolled his eyes and swept up the tunnel. Abeke followed close behind him, her bow drawn. “You really think we can fend off Zerif’s army?” she said. “They’re as fast as they are deadly. We both saw him take down the greatest fortress in Nilo in a matter of hours.”

“We’re not in Zourtzi anymore,” Shane said. “And Faisel was unprepared. The Hellans took more than a few precautions when building this place. We’ll be ready for them.” He slowed, fixing his eyes on her. “I promise.”

Abeke sighed, not meeting his gaze. “I’ve heard that before.”

Shane nodded, feeling the sting of her words. “You’re right,” he said, realizing that words—no matter how sincere—would never win her trust. He wondered how many times he would have to save her life before she began to believe that he was truly changed.

As many times as it takes, he silently promised himself.

The trip aboveground seemed to last forever. Shane’s Redcloaks hadn’t had a chance to map all the twisting tunnels in the base of the mountain, and it was difficult to navigate without Yumaris at his side. Soon, however, he found himself at an open ledge in the main chamber of the ruins, where the volcano’s cauldron had been blocked off with stone.

If Kovo was to be believed, beneath that stone floor was a tunnel that went straight to the Evertree. And somehow these two sets of ruins contained enough power to stop the Wurm. If only they knew how.

The bleating trumpet of a conch shell sounded in the camp, signaling that the watchmen had spotted ships approaching.

Already Shane could hear the footsteps of his fellow Redcloaks as they rushed up and down the footpaths. The open pathways wound inside the volcano like a spool of thread.

His Redcloaks were preparing for battle. They had known this day was coming, and they were ready.

Stead met Shane halfway down the lower stairs. Shadow and Jolt were behind him. “How close are they?” Shane said, joining Stead’s side. “What

are their numbers?”

Stead shook his head. “We’re not sure, King. Our lookouts spotted ships on the horizon, but we can’t see more than that.”

“I can tell you,” Rollan said, following a few feet behind. He put a hand to his temple. “Essix was flying out in that direction. I’ll take a peek.”

Rollan closed his eyes and tilted his head upward. “She’s flying better now,” he said. “I think she’s gotten over the pull of the poles enough to fly straight.” He drew in a sharp breath and his skin turned a slight greenish. “Sorry ... a little motion sick.”

“Do you see Zerif’s ship?” Abeke said, taking Rollan’s hand.

Rollan nodded. “I do. Along with one ... two ... three ... four ... five others.”

“Half a dozen ships?” Stead said, looking to Shane. “That’s an entire fleet.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll be waiting for them,” Shane said, refusing to let his own concern cloud his face. “Good work, Rollan,” he said. “Now tell Essix to get back here before she’s spotted by Zerif’s men.”

He knew from experience that Zerif and his army of enslaved Greencloaks wouldn’t hesitate to send their own flying spirit animals after the falcon.

“Oh, they saw her, all right,” Rollan said, opening his eyes. “She swooped over the deck and left a little, er, *present* for Zerif.” He broke into a devilish grin.

Shane shook his head. “I know you only saw them for a brief moment, but did you get a count of how many crewmen Zerif has?”

Rollan’s smile faltered. “Maybe a hundred Greencloaks—and that was just above deck.”

Shane nodded gravely. “There’s probably another hundred below. That means we’re outnumbered almost four to one.” He became aware of Abeke watching him.

“You don’t seem worried about those odds,” she said.

Shane gave her a smile that he could only hope looked herolike. “We’ve got a *few* tricks up our sleeves.” He turned to Stead and the other

Redcloaks. “Get to your stations. Don’t act until I give the signal.”

Stead and the others saluted and ran off in different directions. He watched as Jolt leaped from rock to rock, until he had reached a platform with a window that looked out over the water. Already the Redcloaks had assembled javelins made of ice for throwing at the landing party.

“I was kidding when I said I wanted a snow fight,” Rollan said. “You really think icicles will stop Zerif’s army?”

“They don’t have to. All we need to do is slow down Zerif’s forces and cut them off with the lava flows.” So saying, he led them to a small platform cut into the side of the rock that overlooked the sea. Along one wall was an iron contraption made from ancient gears and levers that went straight down through the heart of the mountain. He didn’t know how they all worked, and the main set of gears had remained stubbornly in place even when his best tinkerer, a girl named Talon, had tried to release them. He suspected those ancient gears were somehow connected to the Sadrean city on the other side of the world.

“What do you want us to do?” Abeke said.

Shane nodded, pulling a lever in the wall. A small door opened and a stream of molten lava oozed out, running down a small channel that was dug into the floor. “Zerif’s still looking for the last of the Great Beasts—the smart thing would be for us to keep Rollan, Kirat, and Tasha out of the fight.”

“Yeah, but you know that’s not going to happen,” Rollan said, his hand on his dagger. “Besides, this is the end of the line. Either we fend off Zerif, or it’s over for good.”

“Much as it pains me to say it, I think you’ve got a point,” Shane said, pulling another lever to release more lava down another channel. “Especially now that we know his numbers. There’s a lava gate on the eastern end of the volcano that needs soldiers. One of my best Redcloaks, Howl, is already there, but he might need help to operate the mechanism.”

“We’ll do our best,” Abeke said.

“Good,” Shane said, nodding. “Warn Tasha and Kirat to be careful with their spirit animals—that’s why Zerif is here in the first place. They should

keep Ninani and Cabaro passive, if possible. Only summon them if it's a true emergency."

"Speaking of Great Beasts," Rollan said. "Right as we were leaving, Niri was trying to tell us something about Meilin and Takoda. They were saying something to Kovo—don't you think one of us should check on her?"

"There isn't time," Shane snapped. Why did this kid have to question his every order? He was trying to keep them safe. "Niri is safe for now belowground. We'll have to worry about Kovo and the Wyrm once we've taken care of Zerif. For now, I need you to watch after the others."

"We're about to dive into war and you want us babysitting," Rollan said. "You sure this isn't just a way to keep us out of your hair?"

Shane couldn't resist a small grin. "Can't it be both?" He turned on his heel and rushed into the tunnels, his red cloak flapping behind him.



KIRAT

ROLLAN AND ABEKE WERE LEFT TO FIND THEIR OWN way to the camp. Redcloaks ran all around them, shouting commands—some of them sounding more animal than human when they spoke. As soon as Rollan set foot outside of the warmth of the volcano, he was again struck by just how cold this place was. Icy wind swept past him, going straight through his threadbare cloak.

“You’d think the Hellans could have picked a warmer spot,” he said, rubbing his arms.

“They didn’t have a choice,” Abeke said, trudging forward through the snow. “They needed to build along the axis of Erdas. I’m guessing that the snare somehow manipulates the magnetic forces swirling around this point—the same forces that confuse compass needles and make it difficult for Essix to fly.”

Rollan wasn’t sure how magnetic forces could stop the Wyrms, but he chose not to argue the point. It was clear from the conversation with Kovo that there was more to these ruins than he could understand. Essix, for her part, seemed glad to see Rollan out in the open, and she allowed herself to be put into passive state—if for no other reason than to warm up before another flight.

The outer camp of the island was made up of a series of deep, icy trenches that stretched in every direction. Rollan recalled what Shane had said about the lava flues, and he wondered if these trenches were actually part of the mountain's defenses.

They soon found their way to the shelter where the bereft had been staying. The room was empty but for Tasha, however, whose face and eyes were red. Rollan realized that she had been crying. Ninani the Swan sat next to her, trying to comfort her by rubbing her head against Tasha's hand.

"What's going on?" Abeke asked. "Where are the others?"

"They heard the conch shell and shouts of alarm." Tasha shook her head. "I tried to tell them they had to stay, but ... but *he* wouldn't listen." She stomped the snowy ground.

"Let me guess," Rollan said, folding his arms. "Kirat?"

"We need them," Abeke said. "Where did they go?"

Tasha and Ninani led them to the icy port where the *Expiator* was moored. Kirat and the other children were standing at the bottom of the gangplank, caught in an argument with Devin Trunswick—or Worthy or Wiggly—whatever he was calling himself.

"I *command* you to step aside!" Kirat shouted, one hand on the hilt of his rapier. "We are commandeering this vessel!"

The Redcloak folded his arms across his chest, laughing. "You'll have to do better than that." Rollan had to admit: Devin's new catlike eyes truly complemented his smug, disinterested demeanor.

"Come on, Devin!" whined one of the other children, a curly-haired boy Rollan only now recognized as *Dawson* Trunswick. "Let us through."

"No way, little brother," said the Redcloak. "I'm not moving unless King says so. Besides, we need these cannons to fend off the incoming ships."

"Wait," Rollan said, stepping in front of Kirat. "You're trying to take Shane's ship?"

"It's not *Shane's* ship," Kirat snapped. "It belongs to Cordalles's family." He nodded to one of the children huddled around him. "She loaned it to the Redcloaks, and now she wants it back."

"And I wonder who gave her that idea?" Rollan muttered.

“Enough,” Abeke said, putting herself between the two boys. “Zerif’s found us. His ships will be here before sundown.”

Kirat rolled his eyes. “Obviously. The only question is whether or not you two are stupid enough to stick around and die with the rest of those red-cloaked freaks.” He gestured to the other children, who were all huddled around him. “Do what you want, but *we’re* getting out of here.”

“You cowardly little snot!” Tasha said, pushing toward him. “Rollan and Abeke risked their lives to rescue you from Zerif!”

“They brought a marauding army to my father’s doorstep!” Kirat shouted, his voice cracking with real emotion. “My life was perfect before they showed up! And make no mistake, they care nothing for me or you. They only care about our precious spirit animals.”

Rollan peered around, looking for Cabaro. “Where is that big cat anyway?”

Kirat glared at him superciliously. “He’s in passive state, of course.” He pulled back his collar to reveal a lion-shaped tattoo on the back of his neck. “He finally accepted who his master is.” Even though Kirat’s fingers had touched the tattoo, Cabaro had still not appeared.

“Let me guess, *master*,” Rollan said, a grin playing at the edge of his mouth. “He went passive and now he won’t come back?”

Kirat’s dark cheeks turned darker. “I don’t need a spirit animal anyway—all he did was lie around and take up space.”

“Can we save the bickering for *after* the battle?” Abeke said. “The Redcloaks need help—from all of us. And they need this ship’s cannons to defend the shore. Zerif has eight Great Beasts at his command and a fleet of ships filled with Greencloaks. Do you really think you can evade that?”

“We don’t have to,” Kirat said, sniffing. “If Zerif wants Great Beasts, he can have mine. I’ll turn Cabaro over myself in exchange for my life.”

“You’d have to summon him first,” Rollan muttered.

Abeke shot him a glare that seemed to say that he wasn’t helping things. “Turning over the Great Beasts is not an option,” she said flatly.

“That’s easy for you to say!” said an Ardu girl named Anuqi. “You still have your spirit animals—you have something worth fighting for. Some of

us have lost our families, our homes, everything. Why is it always *fight* with you Greencloaks?"

Rollan looked at Abeke, knowing how the girl's words must have stung. "Actually, I *don't* have a spirit animal," Abeke said in a quiet voice. "Zerif took control of Uraza when we were in Nilo." She lowered her head.

Rollan put a hand on Abeke's shoulder, a pathetic attempt at consolation. "You'll always be a Greencloak," he said.

"Save your sob stories for someone who cares," Kirat said, planting his hands on his hips. "We're done being pawns in your little Greencloak spat." The other children muttered in agreement.

"This isn't a *spat!*" Rollan shouted, feeling like he might very well explode on the spot. "We're *trying* to save the world!"

He felt a hand on his arm. It was Abeke. "Yelling isn't going to make them fight," she said gently. She pulled Rollan back from the group, speaking in a low voice. "Look at them. They're scared. Most of them have already lost their spirit animals. That's a pain greater than you could ever understand." And here her face flickered with the pain of her own loss—of her own Uraza ripped from her. "They don't need threats. They need a reason to keep on living. They need to be inspired."

Rollan rolled his eyes. "Inspiration really isn't my style." He desperately wished that Meilin were there—she would certainly know how to rally their spirits.

Abeke nodded, dropping her voice even lower. "We already have a born leader in our midst." She nodded to Kirat, who had resumed his argument with Devin on the gangplank.

"Kirat?" Rollan said. "You've got to be kidding."

Abeke shrugged. "Perhaps we've done him an injustice by treating him like a helpless child. He was not raised to take orders, he was raised to lead. Don't forget, Tarik's blood runs in his veins."

The mention of Tarik's name put a lump in Rollan's throat. Their old Greencloak mentor had been the only adult who had ever really believed in Rollan. He had trusted Rollan when everyone had lost faith in him. And

Rollan knew that Tarik would want him to show that same faith in his nephew. “Ugh,” he muttered. “I hate it when you’re right.”

Abeke nodded to him and together they stepped past the other Great Beast summoners, approaching Kirat. The boy had been scratching Cabaro’s mark on his neck with no success at drawing forth the Great Lion. “We owe you an apology,” she said.

“Keep your apologies,” Kirat said, lowering his hand. “I’d rather keep my life.”

Abeke nudged Rollan, and he realized that she was expecting him to do the talking.

Rollan was good at begging, at lying, at swindling for food, but not *this*. He took a breath, trying to think about what he could say to make Kirat understand. He tried to imagine how Kirat felt in this moment, having fled from the destruction of his home to find himself in this desolate place.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Rollan said slowly. “But it’s not okay to run from your duty. You agreed to protect these children, and they’re depending on you. Your father fought before giving up Zourtzi. Do you really think he would run in this situation?”

The mention of Kirat’s father was clearly a sore spot, and the boy’s face softened slightly.

“The Redcloaks need this ship, not to mention the extra hands,” Abeke added. “These others won’t listen to us—we’re wearing the same cloaks as the army that’s coming this way. But they will listen to you. You’re a trained fighter, and you’ve spent a lifetime watching your father build and protect the greatest fortress in all of Nilo by inspiring thousands of subjects. We need you to lead.”

Rollan reached into his pack and removed a small amulet with an iron chain. “This belonged to your uncle, Tarik.” He held out the chain for Kirat to see. “The man you were named after. He died trying to protect the world from Zerif. And now it’s your turn to join the fight.” He ran his thumb over the cracked green stone. “Your mother gave it to me. She told me I should save it for when you were ready to follow in his footsteps. It was her last wish.”

Kirat's face softened even more. "She ... my mother told you that?"

Rollan nodded. "She did. The only question now is: Are you ready?"

Kirat reached out a hand, which Rollan couldn't help but notice was shaking. The boy took the amulet and stared at it in the cold afternoon light. He held it for what felt like an eternity. Then he dipped his head and placed the chain around his neck. It was not an expensive amulet—Kirat's silken socks were probably worth more than the common gemstone—but when the boy raised his face again, he looked more richly garbed than any prince Rollan had ever seen.

Kirat turned away from them and faced the other children, who were huddled at the bottom of the gangplank, waiting for him to speak.

"Are we going?" asked Cordalles. "We're running out of time."

"There's no time." Kirat took a deep breath and turned toward them. "I did you a disservice by leading you to this port—by letting you think there was a way out of danger. I claimed that it was the smart thing to do. But it wasn't intellect that motivated me. It was cowardice."

"Better to live a coward than die a hero," said Dawson.

"You're probably right," Kirat said, shrugging. "I've never been too impressed by courage. I remember my tutors and scrollmavens talking fondly about courageous heroes falling in battle. Hearing those songs and ballads, I always thought that it was a flimsy reward for losing one's life." A few of the children chuckled at this nervously. "But really," Kirat continued, "all my scorn for courage was an attempt to cover up my fear. My whole life has been dominated by fear. My father was the most powerful merchant lord in all Nilo, second only to the high chieftain. Some would have called him a tyrant. I was terrified of him. But all his soldiers and battlements and might were nothing in the face of Zerif's army." He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

"Not exactly the rousing speech we were hoping for," Rollan muttered.

"Shh," Abeke whispered. "At least they're listening."

Rollan looked at the other children and saw that Abeke was right. The children were hanging on to Kirat's every word, some of them even nodding. "I'm done being afraid," the young lord continued. "I've already

lost everything. My family, my wealth, my home. You have all lost even more than that—having your spirit animals ripped from you. Which means you have nothing to fear. How can we possibly fear a thing like death, when we’ve nothing to live for?” The boy stood before them, his uncle’s amulet glinting against the afternoon sun. “Truly, it is Zerif who should fear *us*.”

He paced in front of them, raising his voice, speaking more quickly. “We are not ordinary children. We didn’t just summon spirit animals. We are the first in the history of Erdas to summon *Great Beasts*.” He pointed to different children as he spoke. “Rumfuss the Boar ... Suka the Polar Bear ... Halawir the Eagle ... Arax the Ram ... Tellun the Elk ... Dinesh the Elephant.”

“But Dinesh is gone,” said a Zhongese girl. “So are the rest of the Beasts.” She had tears standing in her dark eyes.

Kirat nodded. “Dinesh may be gone, but you remain, Kaiina. And you have his resilience within you.” He spread his arms wide. “The same is true for all of us. Our beasts didn’t just come to human partners at random. They came to *us* ... because each of us has something inside ourselves that reflects the nature of our Great Beasts. The wisdom of the elk, the courage of the eagle, the determination of the ram, the cunning of the boar, the strength of the polar bear.” His eyes flicked to Tasha and Ninani. “The grace of the swan.”

Rollan looked at Tasha and the other children. They were all watching Kirat with intense expressions. A few of them looked like they were about to cry. Rollan had to admit that Kirat had a way with words.

Kirat paced in front of them, standing tall. “But this is not a time for mourning. This is a time for action. The same Great Beasts that came to each of us have now been captured by a force more evil than any Erdas has ever faced. They need our help.” He drew his gilded rapier from its sheath, raising it over his head. “Would we really turn our backs on them? Or will we FIGHT?!”

“We fight!” the children cried. There was a flash and the next moment Cabaro stood beside Kirat. The lion raised his head and released a tremendous roar that rocked the boat and shook the water.

The other children stared at the beast in awe. Rollan stared, too. It seemed the great Cabaro had suddenly decided to lend his support to his human partner. And Rollan thought he understood why. This was a whole new Kirat.



THE BATTLE BEGINS

WHILE ABEKE AND KIRAT LED THE NEWLY ENERGIZED children into the caverns, Rollan remained outside to let Essix stretch her wings and fly a few laps around the mountain. He watched her soaring through the cold air and wondered what it would feel like to be so high above the world. He could, of course, share her vision and see it, but that wasn't the same.

"You make sure to stay safe for what's coming," he said to the falcon as she landed again on his arm. Win or lose, he didn't want to end up like the other Great Beast summoners. Like Abeke.

By the time Rollan caught up with them in the caverns, he found them all paired off in sparring formation, each clutching swords. Kirat stood in front with Tasha, who had her staff and was preparing to charge.

"Keep your knees bent," Kirat said instructively. "Don't watch your opponent's eyes or even their hands—the feet can tell you everything you need to know. Wait for them to make the first move, and when they are transferring weight between feet"—he swung the dull end of his rapier under Tasha's leg as she charged—"you draw your weapon in the opposite direction." Tasha flipped backward, landing hard on her back. "Let their movement work against them."

Several of the children managed to apply this technique with similar success. Rollan clapped, stepping into the room. “Not bad,” he said. “Seems you were paying attention to my lessons on the *Expiator*.”

“Only as an example of what *not* to do,” Kirat said, stiffening. “I enjoyed seven years of training under the best duelists in all of Nilo. It’s time I put that knowledge to use.”

Rollan couldn’t help but smile. It seemed that even the new-and-improved Kirat could still talk back. He turned to Abeke, who was at the far wall conferring with Howl, his face covered with a white coyote mask.

“What’s going on over here?” he said.

“We’re stuck.” Howl shook his head, his ears twitching slightly behind the mask. “We need to raise this lava gate, but it’s encased in ice.” He pulled against a lever that refused to budge. “We could melt it with torches, but that could take an hour.”

“Allow me,” Kirat said, joining them. He nodded to Cabaro, who was crouched behind him. The lion rose to his feet and moved to the lever. With one swipe of his mighty claw, the ice shattered, releasing the gate’s lever.

“Problem solved,” Abeke said.

Howl pulled the lever, which now moved easily. There was a ratcheting sound inside the cavern wall, and then a stone gate opened near Rollan’s feet. Steaming lava slid from the hole and ran down a groove in the cavern floor, filling up a sort of cauldron at the edge of the window. “So how does this work?” Rollan said.

Howl pointed at the basin of bubbling lava. “This fills up to create pressure. Like a water tank. And when we pull the main winch”—he hiked his furry thumb at a huge handle—“then the basin will drain into those trenches around the perimeter.”

“A lava moat,” Rollan said. “Not bad.”

“It could be better,” Kirat said. He didn’t sound arrogant, just matter-of-fact. “What if we used archers to drive the incoming forces to that ice shelf near the edge of the island? Then when the lava sweeps through, it will drop them into the freezing sea.”

Rollan, Abeke, and Howl all looked at Kirat, who blushed. “It’s ... just an idea.”

“No, it’s a great idea,” Howl said.

Rollan had to agree. He may have enjoyed more experience in hand-to-hand combat, but he knew nothing about strategy. “There’s one problem,” he said. “Those are still Greencloaks out there—possessed or not. They’re our friends. We’re not going to kill them.”

“Our *friends*?” Kirat turned toward him, eyes flashing. “Tell that to everyone in this room who’s had their family killed.” The boy shook his head, taking a deep breath. Rollan could actually see him forcing back his own emotions. “I know this is hard for you, Rollan. But this is war. And if we don’t stop them, a lot more people will die.”

“He’s right,” Abeke said. “We can’t let our feelings about the Greencloaks get in the way of stopping Zerif.”

Rollan looked at Abeke, shocked to hear such a thing coming from her. Then again, she was a hunter. She always had more of a killer instinct than he did. “Fine,” he said, sighing. “But let’s at least try to keep the casualties to a minimum.”

“I’ll alert Shane to prepare the archers,” Abeke said, stepping back.

Rollan still didn’t feel completely comfortable with Shane. And he knew that Abeke’s feelings were even more complicated.

“You fighting with Shane ... ” he said carefully. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“He’ll need archers,” she said firmly, “and I’m the best shot he’s got.”

Howl pulled up his mask and offered a toothy grin. “Don’t let Talon hear you say that. She’s a master with a crossbow.”

The debate was cut off by the sound of a conch shell from one of the lookouts. Rollan and the others all rushed to the window and peered out over the frozen sea.

Zerif’s fleet was fast approaching: six ships surrounded by a swirling cloud of white fog. The cloud lifted up from the boats and moved closer to them—growing larger and larger.

“What is that stuff?” Rollan said. “It’s too cold for fog.”

Howl narrowed his lupine eyes. “That’s not fog.” He ran to the tunnel and cupped both hands around his mouth. “INCOMING!” he hollered. “Everyone! Back from the windows!”

The next minute a snowy tern darted through the window and plunged its beak straight into Tasha’s leg. She screamed, and before Rollan or anyone else could react, Cabaro pounced on the bird and snatched it in his mighty jaws. He snapped the bird’s neck and flung it to the ground. The tern lay dead and twitching, its head marked with the swirl of Zerif’s parasite.

Rollan looked out the window and saw that the cloud was really thousands of birds—all flying toward them at deadly speed. He ducked to one side as three more snowy terns darted into the window, each one hurtling toward a different target. There were screams all through the camp as birds swept into the mountain, attacking Redcloaks. They were not hard to beat away, but there were so many of them that it was nearly impossible to see.

“Defensive position!” Kirat called, and they all raced to the middle of the room, backs together.

The air shuddered as he heard cannon fire from the *Expiator*. Rollan and Essix fought against two birds that were swarming around Abeke. The war had begun.

Essix screeched, grabbing a possessed tern in her razor claws. “Go!” Rollan cried, slicing his dagger through the other bird’s extended wing. Abeke locked eyes with Rollan for one last moment, and then she was gone.



FLAMES AND FROST

ABEKE RACED THROUGH THE TUNNELS TO THE ARCHERS' keep along the high rim of the volcano. She didn't want to admit it, but she was glad to be away from the other Great Beast summoners—she had been afraid that Howl would insist that she belonged with them. Zerif's terns squawked and slashed through the caverns. The Redcloaks had drawn their arms and were swiping at the birds, chasing them through the maze of tunnels.

"The birds are a distraction!" Abeke yelled. "Everyone stay at your posts!"

Abeke followed the winding path that moved up the inside of the volcano. The path led her through an archway that was nearly as high as the icy tower. She ran through the arch to find a narrow cavern with a series of slat windows cut into the rock—the archers' keep. Shane was there with a handful of other Redcloaks. Yumaris was with him, too, huddled in the corner, fending off an attacking bird that had found its way through the slats. Abeke drew her own bow, quickly nocked an arrow, and cut through the bird—killing it in one shot.

"Oh, bless you, hollow-girl," the old woman said. "That early birdie was trying to get the worm."

“Don’t mention it,” Abeke gasped. Steam rose from her mouth as she struggled to catch her breath. Icy wind whistled through the windows, covering the floor of the cavern with a thin layer of snow. Apparently the Hellans’ lava channels couldn’t go this high.

“What are *you* doing here?” asked the birdlike girl named Talon. She was loading a bolt into her crossbow. “Shouldn’t you be babysitting the others?” She took aim and shot her bolt straight through the heart of an approaching tern, which veered off course and slammed into the opposite wall.

“Change of plans,” Abeke said, lowering her bow. “We need to save our arrows for the landing party. We’ll drive them to the far trench by the water and then release the lava gates.”

“Who died and put you in charge?” Talon said, her sharp eyes darting between Abeke and the window.

“No,” Shane said, stepping to Abeke’s side. “It’s a good plan.” He turned to the row of archers. “Hold fire. Let’s wait out this first wave until Zerif lands.”

Another possessed bird swept through the window.

“What’s the point of waiting if we’ve been pecked to pieces by the time Zerif gets here?!” shouted a boy with a bear mask. He snarled, swatting at the possessed bird, which was trying to claw out his eyes.

Shane drew his sword and cut toward the bird, sending it wheeling out of the tower. “We’ll have to find some other way to take the birds out.” He turned back toward Talon. “Tell Stead to release the gate on balcony number six!”

Talon ran to the archway and shouted the command into the tunnel. The order echoed down the mountain until it reached Stead’s ears. A moment later, a vent of simmering lava spilled out from the side of the rock, directly onto a pile of loosely packed snow at the base of the mountain. The snow hissed and melted to create a huge cloud of billowing vapor. The cloud was enough to blind the incoming birds, which suddenly were unable to navigate. Pained squawks rang out as the soaring flock missed their targets and instead crashed against the outside wall of the mountain.

“Nice work,” Abeke said, shivering.

Shane’s astonished smile at this meager praise sent a tremor of guilt through Abeke’s chest. He looked like she’d just kissed him on the cheek.

Catching himself, the leader of the Redcloaks coughed, pursing his lips into a thin line. “The birds were just a distraction,” he said brusquely. “The real fight is still to come.”

The ground shook as two mortar shells from the incoming fleet struck the side of the mountain—Zerif’s fleet was now in firing range. There was the sound of an explosion near the port, and Abeke watched as the *Expiator* burst into splinters and sank into the cold water.

“There goes our ride home,” Abeke said as the ship’s mast slid below the surface. She stared at the approaching fleet, half shrouded in smoke from the cannon fire, searching for a sight of Zerif’s dark tunic.

“Ready arrows!” Shane called. “Wait for my mark.” He and the other Redcloaks positioned themselves at the windows. “There’s a cache of arrows along the back wall,” he said to Abeke.

“Thanks, but I brought my own.” Abeke drew back her green cloak and removed a single arrow from her full quiver. The black point glinted in the light of the setting sun—it was sharpened obsidian. She had spent most of her voyage honing them to razor points—sharp enough to cut through any armor or shield Zerif might use. She nocked it into the string of her bow, steadying her aim.

“Obsidian points,” Shane said, eyeing her full quiver. “How many of those are for Zerif?”

Abeke tightened her grip on the end of the nocked arrow. “As many as it takes.”

“I’d hate to have you as an enemy,” he said weakly. “Again.”

Abeke looked at him, unable to tell if this was a joke. It was harder to read his expressions now—the reptilian glint in his eyes made him appear less human.

“I’m not going to shoot you, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said, turning back to the window. She had thought about it, of course. But

whatever anger she felt toward Shane was tempered by her memory of their time together among the Conquerors.

Once, Shane had been a guide and friend to her. Maybe the first true friend she ever had. He had been the one who taught Abeke that she could find family wherever she was and encouraged her to find it in Uraza.

There was another rumbling sound—much louder than the mortar shots. Abeke placed her hand on the ledge to keep herself from falling. She could feel the entire mountain shaking from the vibrations. “Sounds like they found a bigger cannon,” she said.

“Not a cannon, hollow-girl,” Yumaris said, shaking her head. She touched the ground, which was still shaking. “Something much bigger. Something deep below ...”

The old woman gestured for them to come to the archway and look inside the mountain. Abeke joined her. The icy tower in the middle of the volcano was slowly rotating, dropping huge chunks of ice onto the floor. She feared the ice might crush the Redcloaks, but when she looked farther down, she saw that the floor was gone. The wedge-shaped sections of the stone around the tower had begun to slide away from one another—pulling apart like the folds of an iris. “Um, what’s happening to your base?”

Shane stepped beside her and shook his head. “No clue. It must have something to do with what your friends were up to.”

The shaking stopped as abruptly as it had started.

The panels in the floor had pulled a few feet from one another, revealing gaps that led to a hollow chamber deep below—how deep, it was impossible to tell. The tower in the middle groaned and shuddered, unable to turn any farther. “Whatever that tower is supposed to do, I think it’s broken,” Abeke said. “The ice must be jamming the mechanism—preventing it from fully opening the floor.”

“I hear it down there,” Yumaris whispered next to them. “So, so *hungry* ...”

Abeke didn’t have time to consider the old woman’s words, because the next moment a mortar shell from Zerif’s fleet crashed into the rock just

above their keep. The impact seemed to jolt the entire ledge, nearly knocking Abeke into the abyss below.

She and Shane both ran back into the keep and resumed their positions, just as another cannon fired—striking the keep directly. The impact of the shell knocked the archers backward, raining rubble and shards of ice down from above.

Shane dove on top of Abeke, knocking her clear of a huge chunk of rock that had been blasted loose—rock that would have easily crushed her. Abeke blinked up at Shane, who was staring at her, his expression unreadable. “I ... can’t breathe,” she said.

Shane nodded and pulled himself off her. “A simple thanks would suffice.” He dusted off his red cloak and picked up his fallen saber.

Abeke sat up, rolling her eyes. When it came to her and Shane, there was nothing simple about it.

“If Zerif keeps up this cannon fire, we won’t live to see the landing party,” she said.

Shane nodded and helped her to her feet. “I agree.”

“King!” Talon shouted. “Check the water! We may be in luck.”

Abeke and Shane rushed to the ledge and looked out toward the fleet. White foam sprayed against the choppy waves. Shouts from possessed Greencloaks rang over the water. The largest ship in Zerif’s fleet was keeling heavily to one side—nearly capsized. Abeke searched the waters for a reason. Was something attacking the ship from below?

Then she spotted it.

At the helm, three long tentacles with opalescent skin were wrapped around the ship’s wheel. The other five were presently engaged in grappling the helmswoman, dragging her away from the steering.

“Mulop!” Abeke said. “He’s attacking the fleet.”

Another ship sloshed to one side as the first boat rammed into it. There was an earsplitting crack that rang out over even the sounds of birds and waves and cannons—the mast snapping in two. It crashed down onto the deck of the second ship, shattering wood and sending it careening to the

side. The cannons that had a moment before been pointing straight at the mountain were now ripped from their stows and flung into the water.

Mulop was single-handedly disarming the entire fleet.

“So much for the cannons!” Shane said, grinning.

But the celebration was cut short before it had even fully begun, for the next moment, Abeke saw the tentacles spasm in pain and grow limp—sliding from the Greencloak and wheel. The octopus’s iridescent skin seemed to change before her eyes, turning to a dull, pale color.

“Mulop,” she said. “He’s been infected.”

She thought of Niri sitting underground—the agony the girl must have been experiencing as her spirit animal was ripped from her soul and bonded with Zerif. “Someone should get Niri,” she whispered. “She’s trapped in that cavern.”

“No time ... ” Shane said. “They’re here.”

Animal snarls and roars filled the air. Zerif’s ships had reached the port and an attack party had thrown claw-shaped anchors into the ice. Greencloaks roared as they slid down the ropes and landed at the edge of the island. Animal companions leaped from the ship and joined their sides—snarling and squawking and growling. Abeke watched, openmouthed, trying to count the forces, which seemed to have doubled in size since she last saw them. Zerif must have been adding to his numbers as his fleet traveled from port to port in pursuit of the *Expiator*.

“Wait for my mark,” Shane called. “We’re going to be driving them to the ledge on the eastern shore, so focus on the group in front. Push them to our left.”

Abeke and the Redcloaks held their arrows tight, waiting for his command. Even at this distance, Abeke could see the black stains on their foreheads, marking them as slaves to Zerif. And somewhere in that horde was Zerif himself. She adjusted her grip on the end of her arrow.

“Fire!” Shane cried.

Two dozen arrows soared out from the keep and plunged down to the ice below—lodging into Greencloaks. Screams rang out through the air as six men staggered to their knees, their animal companions faltering beside

them. The remaining Greencloak forces veered to one side to avoid the assault.

“Perfect!” Shane said, nocking another arrow. “Keep pushing them in that direction.”

Abeke drew another arrow from her quiver and took aim.

“Fire!”

Another volley, this one more successful than the first. A group of fifty or so Greencloaks had splintered off from the main group and was moving closer to the shelf. Abeke and the other archers reloaded and shot again, pushing the invading group to the edge of the ice.

“Release the flue!” Shane cried into the tunnel.

Abeke heard the sound of gears moving deep within the rock and the next moment a burst of searing lava erupted from the side of the mountain. It filled one of the icy trenches, which hissed and steamed, dividing the approaching forces in half.

The lava continued down its path until it reached the fifty Greencloaks huddled on the eastern shelf. Here the trench branched into two smaller streams, which surrounded the group. The ice at this point was thinner, and as soon as the lava made contact, it burned right through and plummeted into the freezing water.

The entire shelf splashed into the ocean. Greencloaks and beasts screamed and splashed, trying to swim to shore in the cold sea.

“Oh-ho!” Yumaris shouted, clapping. “All those nasty greenie-cloaks turned to icicles!”

Abeke glared at the old woman. “If you don’t stop talking about my friends and allies like that, there’s going to be one *more* icicle floating around out there.”

Shane nodded solemnly at Abeke. “We take no pleasure in this,” he said, “but the plan worked well.”

Abeke only frowned, turning back to the window. Cheers could be heard echoing up from the chambers below. The Redcloaks hadn’t defeated Zerif’s forces, of course, but they had reduced its numbers by a quarter.

Still, the battle was far from over. Already another wave of Greencloaks had descended from the ships. And the possessed Mulop was already in the water where the Greencloaks had fallen. He was using his tentacles to catch and drag them back to shore—freezing cold, but still alive.

The Redcloaks released another two gates, filling trenches with lava to drive back the incoming forces. The flow created a molten perimeter around the mountain. There was a shout below as another gate opened at the base of the volcano.

This time, instead of lava, there was a flutter of red fabric as a troop of Redcloaks slid down the icy slope, swords in hands. These Redcloaks were not ordinary fighters, for they all possessed traits of the animal companions that they had merged with. They were faster, stronger, fiercer than any human could hope to be. They met the approaching Greencloaks head-on, pushing Zerif's forces back toward the water.

“Fire!” Shane cried, and another volley rained down on the Greencloaks. Abeke crouched beside him, lending her arrows to the cause. Shane and his Redcloaks were fine shots, but none half as good as her. When she let fly an arrow—it always found her mark.

“Nice work, Greencloak!” Talon said, reloading her crossbow. “I think half the fighters in that field have your arrows in them.”

Abeke didn't have time to respond to the compliment. She was too busy searching the field for her real prey. And then, in the shifting steam, she saw him—

Zerif.

The man had let his troops charge ahead of him like a coward. Now he was stepping down from the gangplank of his ship, his dark tunic rustling in the wind.

Abeke held her breath, drawing back her arrow. Zerif probably thought he was well out of range, but he couldn't account for the arrows Abeke was using—their obsidian points chiseled to perfection. The ends had been nocked with feathers taken from Essix herself.

The air was cold, but a thin trickle of sweat ran down Abeke's brow.

“Patience,” she whispered to herself. She would only have one chance to surprise him.

Zerif reached the shore and marched into the fray—a pair of short swords in his gloved hands. Zerif had seen his share of battles, and even without the power of his Great Beasts, he was a formidable swordsman. He charged toward a Redcloak named Flip who had managed to bound over the main Greencloak forces with a series of impossible, froglike jumps.

Zerif crouched down and slashed one blade quickly through Flip’s heel. The Redcloak collapsed, screaming. Zerif stomped on Flip’s neck to stifle his cry, before pushing his sword through his heart and silencing him completely.

Abeke wanted to look away from the scene, but she didn’t dare blink, for fear of losing her target.

“Patience ... ” she whispered to herself, steam rising from her mouth. The air was blisteringly cold, and she had to fight to keep her aim steady. She could feel the other archers watching her now. Shane had suspended fire, so none of them could distract her from her target. One clean shot and she could end this entire war. “A little closer ... ”

Zerif was almost in range now. He had released his Great Beasts, which slithered and stampeded alongside him—his personal guards, all bonded to him through the parasites: Dinesh the Elephant, Rumfuss the Ram, Gerathon the Serpent, Tellun the Elk, Suka the Polar Bear, Arax the Ram, Halawir the Eagle, and ...

Abeke caught her breath. “No ... ”

Shane appeared beside her, glancing out the small window. “What’s wrong?” he said. “You have a shot, take it.”

Abeke blinked, her arrow still nocked in her bow. She adjusted her grip.

“I ... I can’t ... ” Standing in front of Zerif was a sleek yellow beast with deep purple eyes. It was Uraza. *Her* Uraza. The leopard had climbed onto a hunk of fallen ice and was blocking Abeke’s shot. If she missed by even an inch, it would go straight through Uraza’s neck. The leopard paused, tilting her head up toward the mountain—and then looked directly at Abeke.

Abeke lowered her bow, dropping to the ground. “I can’t do it,” she said. Her voice was shaking. Her hands slick with sweat. “I can’t shoot her....”

She caught the eyes of Talon and Shane, both of whom were looking at her in confusion.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She sat up and looked back toward the battlefield—but Uraza and Zerif were both gone.

The ground shook beneath her, violently enough that she had to steady herself against Shane’s arm. Chunks of rock and ice fell from the walls around her. There was a huge cracking sound and the entire island shuddered. Redcloaks and Greencloaks alike cried out as the impact threw them all to the ground. A huge crack formed up the side of the volcano wall, showering rubble down on the fighters below.

“What’s going on down there?” Talon shouted. “It feels like the mountain’s being torn apart from the inside.”

Yumaris, who had been huddled in the corner, skittered out from the shadows. “That is the sound of destruction. The end of Erdas.” Her face was pale, and for once she sounded completely sane. “Look! Look!” She dragged Abeke and the Redcloaks through the archway to the path overlooking the volcano floor.

The stone panels at the base of the tower had been smashed apart, creating a larger hole. From somewhere deep below, a gargling shriek rang out, curdling the air. Abeke felt a prickly nausea stutter up her spine. She inched closer to the edge of the path for a better look. The broken floor revealed a deep steaming hole that seemed to disappear straight into the heart of Erdas. Streams of hot lava trickled from the edges, bathing it in a dark orange light. And slithering out from that hole was a hideous creature made of slick black tentacles and glowing red eyes.

“The Wurm,” Yumaris whispered. “It’s here.”

A decorative graphic featuring a central, dark, pointed shape resembling a drop or a stylized flame. The number '22' is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font in the center of this shape. On either side of the central shape are two symmetrical, light-colored, spiral patterns that resemble nautilus shells or stylized wings, curving outwards and upwards.

22

LAST WORDS

WHEN ABEKE WAS YOUNG AND AFRAID OF THE DARK, her mother used to tell her that fear of a thing is more terrible than the sight of it—that the imagination conjures visions worse than anything nature can produce. She would light a torch in their rondavel and explain there was no terror so great it could withstand the light of reality.

But now, staring at the Wurm, Abeke knew her mother had been wrong. This creature was more disturbing than anything she had ever conceived—and the light of the cavern only served to expose its horror.

The Wurm was a roiling, slithering nightmare that coated whatever it touched in black ooze. It perched itself on the edge of the chasm from which it had crawled, peering around at the ruins with glowing red eyes. It opened its mouth to reveal row after row of razor-sharp teeth, and screeched.

“Wow,” Shane said. “The Hellan carvings didn’t quite do it justice.”

Yumaris started shaking, backing away from the ledge. “So hungry ... so hungry ...”

Battle cries rang out as a few Redcloaks on the lower levels charged the creature, blades drawn. The Wurm hissed and shot its tendrils out, snatching

up the Redcloaks. It snapped their bones like twigs before hurling them away.

“Shane!” It was Talon. Her face was pale. “You need to look outside. The Greencloaks—something’s happening to them.”

Shane and Abeke pulled themselves away from the sight of the Wyrms and followed Talon back to the window. The icy battlefield was strewn with the bodies of fallen Greencloaks—cut down by arrows and lava and Redcloaks.

But now they were moving. One by one the fallen Greencloaks picked themselves up from the snow. The resurrected army raised their weapons and cried out, their voices as one, in a sort of inhuman roar.

“The Wyrms,” Yumaris said, clutching Abeke’s arm in her gnarled hands. “It calls to them. Makes them stronger.”

“How much stronger?” Shane said, readying his bow.

But he found out soon enough. The reinvigorated Greencloaks charged toward the mountain, cutting past the remaining Redcloaks like they were nothing. Shane called a volley of arrows down on them, but even though most of the arrows found their marks, the horde kept running. They tore through the stone gates with their bare hands and swept into the mountain.

Abeke listened to the shouts and clashing blades as the battle moved inside the volcano. She thought of Rollan, who was on one of the lower outposts—maybe even within reach of the Wyrms. She closed her eyes, hoping he was smart enough to stay clear of its flailing tentacles.

“How do we stop that thing?” she said.

Shane shook his head. “I have no idea.” He had cast aside his bow and drew his saber. The other Redcloak archers drew their own swords. “But we’ll die trying.”

Abeke followed Shane and his forces down the tunnels—running as fast as her legs could carry her. She had seen the new ferocity of the Greencloaks. She and the others were heading straight into slaughter, but what choice did they have? If just one of them could get close enough to stop the Wyrms, *maybe* they would have a chance at slowing Zerif’s forces.

Shane and his Redcloaks had the advantage of animal speed and were pulling ahead of Abeke—leaping from level to level. Abeke cursed her slowness as she slung her bow over her shoulder and clambered down a pile of rubble where the path had fallen away.

“Hollow-girl!” a voice cried beside her.

Abeke dropped down to the path to see Yumaris there. The old woman’s mouth hung open in surprise. “There’s a message from below. You must follow me. Quickly! Quickly!”

She tried to grab Abeke’s hand, but Abeke pulled back. “I don’t have time for this,” she said. “Shane and the Redcloaks are about to attack the Wyrms before it can reach Zerif.”

But Yumaris ignored her. She snatched Abeke’s arm and held it fast. “You must speak to the newling, hollow-girl. Quickly!”

Abeke followed Yumaris through the battle. The closer they came to the hole in the middle of the volcano, the more violent the combat became. Redcloaks fought valiantly against possessed Greencloaks—and the sight of her former comrades fighting tooth and claw against Shane’s desperate forces stole her breath away.

Screams and snarls rang out in every direction. Yumaris dragged Abeke through a tunnel that opened into a familiar chamber—to the lava gate where Rollan had been posted with Kirat and the Great Beast summoners.

Howl and Tasha stood at the mouth of the tunnel, fending off approaching Greencloaks, the bulk of whom had focused their efforts on reaching the Wyrms.

“Welcome back,” Tasha said as Abeke ran past her and into the cavern. The floor of the cavern was littered with the corpses of snowy terns. Abeke’s eyes instantly found Rollan slumped against the wall, Essix on his shoulder.

“You’re still alive!” she said, running to him and wrapping him in a hug.

“Barely,” Rollan said. He pointed to a bloody gash along his cheek. “Parting gift from one of Zerif’s thugs, who managed to scale up through the window. What do you think? Handsome?”

“I’d say you got off easy.” She winked. “Meilin will love it.”

Rollan's eyes went wide. "Who said anything about Meilin?"

"Enough joking around," Kirat said, rapier in hand. "We have someone who needs to talk to you."

Three of the summoners stepped back from the corner to reveal someone else in the room. A small girl was huddled on the ground, wet and trembling.

Niri stared up at Abeke with shimmering green eyes.

"Niri?" Abeke said, rushing toward her. She knelt down next to the girl, whose face was pale. Niri had red rings under her eyes. It looked like she'd aged ten years in the last three hours. "Mulop," Abeke said. "You lost him."

Niri nodded, her body shaking. "One moment I could feel him ... and then he was *gone*.... It felt like I was ripped in half...." She closed her eyes and tears spilled down her cheeks.

Abeke placed a hand on hers. "I know how it feels." She took a deep breath. "The pain fades, gets duller." This was not exactly true, but she felt like she had to offer some consolation. Abeke looked at Niri's thin legs, which lay motionless on the earth. Her shins and feet were raw and bleeding. "How did you get up here?"

"I pulled myself up from the cavern." She swallowed, massaging her palms, which were also cut. "Dragged myself all the way here. I had to find you." She blinked her eyes, as though trying to stem a fresh tide of tears. "Before Mulop—before *it* happened—I could hear what was happening in Sadre. I know how the trap works—it changes the tides of Erdas. Kovo and the others tried to start the trap in Sadre, but it didn't work. Something went wrong."

Abeke remembered how the rotating tower had stopped abruptly. "It got jammed."

"You have to start the trap—before the Wurm has a chance to bond with Zerif. Once it finds its host, it will be too powerful."

Abeke straightened up, releasing a steady breath. Having grown up hunting, she knew a thing or two about traps, but this sounded a lot more complicated than what she could pull off with ropes and counterweights. "How do we spring the trap?"

“They started the trap in Sadre ... by striking a bell.”

“There’s no bell in these ruins,” Howl said. “King’s had us travel through every corridor and passage. Did they tell you where it was?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know any more.” Niri shook her head, staring up at them. “But I do know that if you fail, everything is lost.”

Rollan scratched his head. “No pressure.”

“All right,” Kirat said, stepping back. “So our first task is to keep Zerif away from the Wyrm until we can locate this bell. We can set up a perimeter around the edges of the fortress, to keep the Wyrm in the middle of the cavern floor. We don’t want it accidentally bringing this entire mountain down on top of us.” As he spoke, he drew marks in the dirt with the tip of his sword. “While the Wyrm is distracted, we’ll need a second party to sneak into the lower tunnels in search of the bell.” He turned to Howl. “I’m guessing you have a good nose. Do you think you could lead the search?”

Howl gave a lupine grin. “Try and stop me.”

“Good,” Kirat continued. “Tasha should go with you. She can summon Ninani to search places that are out of reach or might be hidden from the ground.”

Abeke was impressed. Kirat really did sound like his uncle. And more important, he had a plan.

Rollan must have read her mind. “He’s been like this since you left. I’d be annoyed if it weren’t for the fact that I know Tarik would approve.” He shrugged. “Besides, it’s nice to have someone else to blame when things go wrong.”

“Let’s not talk about things going wrong,” Abeke said.

A cry broke out from the tunnel as Howl and Tasha were knocked backward by a snarling streak of yellow. The two screamed in pain, clutching their arms. Blood seeped from long claw marks where they had been slashed through their cloaks.

Standing above them was a sleek creature with violet eyes.



ABEKE STARED AT THE BEAST, HER HEART RACING. “Uraza?” she said. It was the closest she’d been to her spirit animal since losing her on the rocky shores of Zourtzi.

The Great Beast stalked closer to Abeke, licking her white fangs. The parasite beneath her leopard brow was pulsing and black, wriggling and twisting beneath the flesh. The rims of Uraza’s eyes were bloodshot and dark. She looked like a changed creature.

Rollan and the others drew their blades.

“Weapons down!” Abeke shouted. “No one hurts her.”

She lowered her own bow, keeping her eyes fixed on Uraza’s. “I don’t know what Zerif’s done to you, but I *know* you, Uraza.” Her voice was shaking. “Deep down, I know you don’t want to hurt—”

Uraza roared, leaping straight at her, claws raised—pouncing to kill.

“No!” Abeke screamed, stumbling backward.

She registered a flash of red fabric and Uraza’s body suddenly hurtled to one side—veering off course and smashing against the cavern wall. The beast roared and snapped at the thing that had prevented her from killing Abeke.

Rollan rushed to Abeke’s side, helping her up.

Abeke could only stare at the swirling red cape rolling across the ground, the figure fighting to subdue Uraza. One of the Redcloaks had leaped to save her. She caught a glint of yellow eyes behind a plain white mask as her rescuer drew his saber.

“Shane,” she whispered.

Even with his heightened speed, Shane was too slow. Uraza bit down on his side, and Shane cried out in agony, dropping his sword. The Great Beast drew him off the ground and shook him back and forth, driving her teeth deeper into his flesh.

Abeke had hunted with Uraza countless times. She’d seen her do similar things to finish off wounded prey. But now the prey was *Shane*.

“Let him go!” Abeke scrambled across the dirt and grabbed her bow. This time she did not hesitate. She nocked an arrow and aimed it at Uraza.

The arrow plunged straight through Uraza’s leg.

The Great Leopard snarled and stumbled back, releasing Shane, who fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Uraza gave a gargling wheeze, as if struggling for air. Blood ran freely from her wound. She roared at Abeke and then—in a flash of bright light—vanished from her spot, leaving only a red stain on the cavern floor. She had been summoned into passive state by her new master.

“Shane!” Abeke ran to the boy, falling to her knees.

Shane moaned in pain. Dark blood soaked his side. His skin was pale and covered with perspiration.

“Just keep breathing,” she said, taking his head in her hands. “Keep breathing....”

Shane lolled his head toward her, opening his yellow eyes. “I ... saw Uraza running toward the tunnel and I was afraid she might ... hurt you.” He flinched, clenching his jaw tight as he gave a painful cough. When he opened his mouth again, there was blood on his lips.

“I ... I’m sorry, Abeke.” His voice was so weak she could barely hear it over the sounds of battle echoing up from the tunnels below. “I’m sorry for everything.” He winced, giving another violent cough.

He did not move again.

“Not you.... Not you.... ” Abeke clutched the boy’s lifeless body in her arms, pulling him close to her chest. He had given his life trying to win her forgiveness. If she had only told him before how she felt, what he meant to her, he might still be alive.

Abeke clenched her eyes shut, letting the tears spill down her face. Tarik, the Greencloaks, Uraza, Shane ... It was all too much loss. Too much destruction. Her legs felt numb beneath her. Her entire body shook as she released a rasping sob.

She became aware of new people charging into the chamber. There were shouts, and the clashing of swords, and animal roars—a short scuffle that seemed to end as soon as it had begun. Abeke wiped her eyes and looked up to see three dozen of Zerif’s Greencloaks lining the wall of the cavern, each with swords at the necks of her friends. If there had been a fight, it was a quick one—normal children were no match for trained Greencloaks.

Her eyes found a tall figure wearing a dark tunic, who was watching her with an amused expression.

“Zerif,” she said, releasing her grip on Shane’s body.

“Poor little Abeke,” the man said, stepping close to her. “How far you’ve fallen.” His tunic was torn, revealing the intersecting tattoos of his stolen Great Beasts—including the shape of Uraza. “I remember when I first found you: half-feral, fresh from hunting alone in the savannah, despite your father’s disapproval. You were meek and obedient at the time, but I could sense—deep down—that you had the instincts of a killer.”

Zerif’s lip curled in disgust. “Now look at you. A whimpering child, crying over the corpse of the boy who betrayed you. I had such high hopes for you once. You traded unlimited power for a shabby green cloak.” He shrugged. “Then again, maybe I should thank you. If Kovo *had* succeeded, then I might not be here right now. Commander of eight Great Beasts—oops, make that nine!” He smiled at Niri, who was still lying defenseless in the corner. “Mulop says hello.” He held out his palm to reveal a tattoo of an octopus.

“If it’s all the same to you,” Rollan said, “I’d rather you just kill us. Anything is better than listening to you gloat.”

“Now, now, Rollan.” Zerif wagged a finger. “Don’t be a sore loser. Besides, I wouldn’t dream of killing you ... *yet*.” He gave a poisonous smile. He pointed to the boy’s chest, where the mark of Essix was visible beneath a tear in his shirt. “You have something I want. Besides, you Greencloak brats should be alive to witness your defeat firsthand.”

Abeke was pulled to her feet by a Southern Zhonghese girl.

“Abeke, meet Raisha,” Zerif said cheerfully. “I don’t believe you two have been introduced. Raisha was a wonderful assistant when I first began this little undertaking. She helped me gather so many of the Great Beasts. And then, when she herself summoned Gerathon the Serpent, Raisha became an even greater help.”

Raisha’s eyes were dark and expressionless. The girl’s skin was so pale it was almost translucent, and her hair had grown brittle and thin. Abeke tried to pull herself free, but Raisha’s grip was inhumanly strong. And it made sense. There was hardly anything human about her anymore.

“We’ll just hang on to those,” Zerif hissed as Raisha removed Abeke’s bow and quiver, heaving them around her own shoulder.

Abeke and Rollan and the other children were led through the tunnels into the central chamber of the volcano. The half-opened floor of the ruins glowed orange from the streams of fresh magma pouring into the chasm. The frozen tower in the middle of the volcano had begun to thaw in the heat, leaking streams of water that ran down through the cracks and fizzled into clouds of sulfuric steam.

The perimeter of the chamber was lined with Redcloaks, all of whom were also being held at swordpoint by Zerif’s thralls. And in the middle of the crag, perched on the edge of a shard of rock, was the Wyrn.

“Whoa,” Rollan muttered. “That thing’s even uglier up close—*unngff!*” He grimaced as the Greencloak holding him twisted his arm.

“Ugly?” Zerif said, turning around. “I think it’s rather beautiful.” He placed his hands behind his back, staring at the twitching beast before them. “A creature of raw and infinite power—power that will soon be mine.”

Abeke stared at the Wyrn, which was watching Zerif with its glowing eyes. She had no idea whether the creature could understand what Zerif was

saying or if it cared. The Wyrms' expression was inscrutable, but she had the uncanny feeling that it was hungry.

"You really think you can control that thing?" she said.

Zerif gave a wary chuckle. "You ask this of the man who commands two hundred Greencloaks and a battalion of Great Beasts? The man who devastated the fallen King Shane and his ridiculous Redcloaks." He turned back to the waiting Wyrms. "This creature understands the natural order of Erdas—it will submit to one more powerful than itself. And if it resists, I have ways to change its mind." He slid a hand into his haversack and removed a small glass vial. Inside was a tiny black parasite—the same sort of parasite he had used to possess Uraza and the other Great Beasts. The same parasite that controlled his Greencloak army.

Abeke watched him uncork the vial and walk toward the Wyrms. "Easy now," he said, holding the bottle out in front of him. "This won't hurt a bit. ..."

The Wyrms did not recoil or show any signs of struggle. Instead it opened its mouth and gave a sort of chirping shriek. At once, the Greencloaks closest to Zerif marched toward him and grabbed the man by the arms, pinning him to one spot.

"Stop!" Zerif cried out in surprise. "I command you to release me!"

But the Greencloaks held him fast.

Zerif's vial fell to the ground, shattering against the rock. The parasite, now freed, wriggled its way across the stone until it reached the Wyrms.

The huge creature extended one of its oozing black tentacles. With a touch, the parasite's writhing shape melted away—their shining black hides melding into one.

"The parasites ... " Abeke said. "They're *part of* the Wyrms." She looked around at the blank expressions of the infected Greencloaks and Great Beasts, and thought she understood what was happening. All of them, human and animal alike, were being controlled by the Wyrms—they had a fraction of the Wyrms inside their minds.

The Wyrms shrieked again, and the Greencloaks holding Zerif pulled him toward the creature's open mouth.

“This is not what was supposed to happen!” Zerif screamed, kicking out his legs. “I command you! Let *go!*” He pulled and thrashed, trying to get free, but the possessed Greencloaks dragged him ever closer.

Abeke watched in horror, finally understanding.

Zerif was never the hunter, she realized. He was the prey.

The Wyrms hissed as its every tentacle descended upon Zerif—plunging right into his flesh.

“*Noooooo!*” the man screamed. Thin black tendrils snaked beneath his skin, flooding his body with viscous ooze. As this happened, the Wyrms itself became smaller—it was as though the creature was pouring itself into his veins.

Abeke shut her eyes, unable to watch. She wished her hands were free so she could cover her ears to block out Zerif’s cries.

He was evil. He deserved to die. But no living creature deserved *this*.

A moment later, the screaming stopped. Abeke opened her eyes again to find that the Wyrms was no longer there.

Instead there was only Zerif. The man had been released by the Greencloaks and now lay collapsed on the ground, gasping and wheezing. He slowly pulled himself upright. For a moment Zerif just stood there, teetering under his own weight, his dark eyes shining against the red light.

Then he spoke.

“*At lassstttt,*” he said in a deep, inhuman voice—one that seemed to reverberate through his every pore, “*I am fully borrrnnnn.*”



SLAVE AND MASTER

ABEKE STARED AT ZERIF ... OR RATHER THE THING THAT had been Zerif just a moment before.

His eyes were completely dark—shining pools of ooze that swirled and shifted unnaturally. His skin was a dull gray, lined with twitching veins that pulsed and shifted as he breathed. He was not a man anymore. He was a shell.

Abeke wanted to scream, to run away from him. But Raisha held her fast to her spot, her scaly hands digging deep into Abeke's flesh.

"What did you do to Zerif?" Abeke said to the Thing standing before her.

The Thing that had been Zerif tilted its head, an almost curious expression on its ghastly face.

"*Whatt I diddd?*" Its words were garbled, as though it were still learning how to use its new human mouth. "*Whatt I diddd?*"

The Thing stretched out its hand toward one of the nearest Redcloaks—a woman named Shadow. Thin black tentacles shot out of its fingertips and wrapped around the woman's neck. Shadow let out a cry as she was lifted clear off the ground. Abeke watched in horror as her skin went from brown to gray to white. Even her dark hair lost its color. It was as though the Thing

were sucking the very life from her. With a final twitch, the woman's body went limp.

The Thing jerked its hand and flung Shadow's lifeless body into the gaping chasm behind it.

"*Aaahhhh*," the Thing sighed as its tentacles withdrew back into its hand. It licked its teeth, which were stained black.

"Zerif, can you hear me?" Abeke shouted, hoping desperately that he could. "You have to resist the Wyrms' power—you have to fight back before it consumes you!"

"*Conssssummmme ...* " the Thing said. "*Yesssssss.*" It turned its eyes toward something just behind Abeke. It flicked out a tongue, as if tasting the air. A hungry smile spread across its black lips. "*Aaaahhhh ...* "

Abeke craned her neck to see that the Thing was looking straight at Rollan. The boy stared right back at it, his eyes burning with hate. "Just try it, you ugly sack of—"

Before he could even finish speaking, the Thing had lashed out at Rollan with its tentacles—lifting him clear off the ground.

"No!" Abeke screamed, pulling against Raisha's grip. The girl held her fast.

Rollan screamed, his body contorting in pain. With a desperate roar, he ripped his left arm free of its oozing binds and touched the tattoo on his chest. In a flash, Essix was above him, beating her wings.

"Essix, fly away!" Rollan screamed. "Don't let it take you!"

The gyrfalcon didn't listen. She screeched, swooping straight at Rollan's attacker with her talons spread.

The Thing that had been Zerif was ready. It raised its other hand and quickly caught Essix in its tendrils—holding them both aloft over the gaping pit.

Abeke watched, trembling, as Rollan and his Great Beast screamed in pain—their eyes growing dimmer as the Thing sucked the very life from them. In another minute, they would both be dead. She had to *do* something!

She scanned the cavern and saw Niri. The girl had been dragged through the tunnels by one of the Greencloaks. Niri had told her that they had to find some sort of bell—but there was no bell—and even if they could find it, it was already too late.

Rollan screamed again. Abeke clenched her eyes shut, feeling the full weight of her failure. She had fought for so long, and for what? Everything she touched turned to destruction. Soon even these ruins would crumble around her.

She opened her eyes and saw that the ground beneath her feet was wet. Thin streams of water cascaded down from the ice into the middle of the ruins. She blinked, peering up the length of the tower.

A small circle of red sky was still visible overhead. The top of the tower glinted against the setting sun as the final bits of ice melted away, revealing an open platform just beneath the stone cornice. Hanging from the ancient rafters was something dark and heavy and made of iron—

A bell.

Abeke stared up at the bell, catching her breath. It had been right in front of them the whole time. Only now it was too late. Even if ringing the bell could somehow help, she was a hundred feet beneath it with only seconds to spare.

“Sssooo sssweet,” the Thing snarled, raising its prey higher over its head. Rollan screamed out again, but his voice sounded fainter, like the last drops of life were being sucked from him. His eyes met Abeke’s. He moved his lips, but no words came out. She knew that she was seeing her friend for the last time. This was the end.

Abeke didn’t have time to consider the odds. She didn’t have time to consider her pain. She had to act. With a desperate cry, she swung her head backward, slamming her skull into Raisha’s jaw. Her captor screamed and staggered backward, as much out of surprise as pain. Abeke spun around and snatched the bow and quiver from Raisha’s shoulder.

Raisha shrieked, trying to grab her lost prisoner. Abeke dove clear of her grasp and rolled across the ground. She sprang to her feet with her bow raised—an arrow pointed directly at the Thing. “Let them go!” she said, her

obsidian arrowhead glinting in the magma's warm light. She could feel the others in the chamber watching her, confused, terrified.

The Thing that had been Zerif seemed to pause a moment, keeping Rollan and Essix both hanging in the air, somewhere between life and death. "*It would threaten meeee?*" It stretched its mouth into a rictus grin.

"The arrow's not for you," Abeke said. And quick as a flash, she raised her bow over her head and let fly.



THE BURNING TIDE

ABEKE'S ARROW ARCED THROUGH THE AIR FOR WHAT felt like an eternity. Finally it sliced up through the high bannister railing and struck the edge of the bell with a light *ting!*

The sound was barely a whisper, but it echoed through the whole cavern. Everyone around Abeke seemed to be holding their collective breath, waiting to see what would happen next. Even the Thing dropped its prey and was watching the bell.

And when Abeke saw its face, she could tell that it was nervous. “*It knowssss this ...*” it hissed. “*Turningggg ...*”

The ringing of the bell finally gave way to another sound—a deep rumbling that shook the entire mountain. The tower in the middle of the ruins trembled and then shifted, slowly rotating on its axis. Rubble and ice fell from the walls of the volcano, crashing to the cavern floor around Abeke. There was a ripping sound as part of the bottom wall broke loose—letting a flood of cold water gush in from the ocean outside.

The biggest change, however, was in the hole. The panels of the cavern floor retreated into the walls of the mountain, revealing a huge chasm that went straight down into the heart of Erdas. Redcloaks and Greencloaks alike scrambled to find stable ground around the perimeter. The Thing had

also moved, stranding itself on the front steps of the bell tower, which was now surrounded by yawning darkness on all sides.

The bell tower continued rotating. Its foundation seemed to go down as far as the chasm. Stone buttresses secured the lower tower to the inside walls of the tunnel, and as these moved, giant cracks appeared in the hole. Bubbling magma from deep within the earth spewed out, filling the hole to the very brim. The magma churned and frothed—creating a hissing whirlpool around the spinning tower.

As the tower turned, Abeke felt a sort of queasy shift in the air, like her stomach was folding inside out. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and she feared her teeth were going to crack. She wasn't the only one experiencing strange symptoms. Yumaris and the Redcloaks were all clutching their heads in agony, as if they were being ripped apart from the inside. Zerif's Greencloaks had dropped to the ground and were snarling and shrieking and snorting in furious confusion. Some tried to dig into the rock with their hands. Others were climbing the walls. Their spirit animals staggered around, bumping into one another as though confused about where they were.

The only ones unaffected by the tower seemed to be Abeke and the other kids who had *lost* their spirit animals. They all remained standing, watching the chaos around them.

“What’s happening to my brother?” Dawson Trunswick said, backing away from Worthy. Devin was writhing on the cavern floor, clutching his head. “What did you do?”

Abeke swallowed, shaking her head. “I have no idea.”



There are some moments that seem to be almost infinite.

When Rollan saw Abeke’s arrow soar up toward the sky and strike the bell, he felt as though it was the death knell of his own existence. The Wyrms creature had sucked him dry, and all that was left for him to do was let go and slip into death. But then something strange happened. That bell’s

chime continued to ring and ring and ring. It rang so loud that the entire world around him began to shake and blur. He felt a prickling nausea sweep through his entire body and the next thing he knew, he was floating high in the air, staring down at his own body, which lay at the foot of the stone tower.

This is what people must mean by an out-of-body experience, he thought. Rollan flapped his wings, watching as his thin body lurched forward, blinking in confusion, darting its head all around. The sight was so strange that it took Rollan a second to realize that he was *flapping his wings*.

Rollan opened his mouth to let out a cry, but all that came was a raspy *squawk!* The boy on the ground darted his head up and stared at Rollan—looking truly bewildered.

And that's when the true realization came over him. He wasn't Rollan from Concorba. He was a bird. And not just any bird ... He was *Essix* ... or rather, his mind was *inside* Essix's body.

Rollan let out another bewildered squawk and rose up higher into the air.

All he could think to do was fly higher and higher until he burst from the mouth of the volcano. He stretched out his wings and let the cold air beat against his face.

For the first time in his life, he felt truly *free*.



Deep underground, on the other side of Erdas, Meilin felt a rumbling beneath her as the snare in the middle of the fallen city began to turn once more. She stumbled to one side and in the space of a shuddering heartbeat, she found herself staring out from a different pair of eyes—dark, animal eyes pressed into the muzzle of a soft, round face. She stared at her paws, black fur stained red with blood from the battle against the Wyrms.

She blinked, looking out at the host of wounded Sadrean soldiers in the Fallen City. Every face she saw filled her with an aching pang. She felt an

overwhelming desire to care for every person suffering—to make each of them whole again.

She padded onto the battlefield and began to help.



For Conor, it was like waking from a terrible dream. Dreams were something Conor was good at—and more than once he had experienced dreams that showed him his own future. But all of those were nothing compared to this. He had been trapped inside his own body for so long, unable to fight the power of the parasite.

But then he opened his eyes and knew—knew instantly—that something had shifted in Erdas. The fever was gone. The wriggling parasite no longer burrowing into his flesh. The Wyrms' voice no longer hissing in his mind.

The shores of the Sulfur Sea had drawn back, as if pulled away from the city by some invisible force. Conor drew himself up and limped over to a pool of dark water left in the sand. He bowed his head, lapping at the pool with his pink tongue. Then he stood upright and stared into his reflection. Blue eyes as deep as the sky. It was the face of Briggan.



Abeke stared at the cavern, which was now echoing with the sounds of hundreds of confused Greencloaks and their even more confused spirit animals. But as she watched them, she began to see how they were behaving—the humans acting like beasts, and the beasts like humans.

Everyone except Abeke and the other children who had lost their spirit animals.

“The snare,” she said. “It’s somehow reversed the connection between humans and their animal companions.”

The words sounded ludicrous coming out of her mouth, but her eyes told a different story. She stared up at the tower, which was still turning, though more slowly now. The swirling lava bubbled and hissed around it, creating

a fiery whirlpool. “Look at the tides!” called the girl Cordalles, pointing at a gaping hole in the rock.

Abeke looked outside and saw that the ocean was churning, swelling up into huge waves that swirled in the same direction as the lava. Even the spilled water from the icy tower was cutting an arc across the ground, moving on its own.

Abeke looked back toward the tower—at the Thing that was Zerif. The figure remained standing but was staring around at the cavern with a confused expression, inching back from the swirling lava at his feet. And when Abeke saw his eyes, she caught a slight flash of hazel. The same eyes she had first seen in her village in Nilo.

“Zerif!” she shouted. Abeke still had her bow and quiver. She wanted to shoot every arrow she had at the man—but one look at his face and she knew that he was just as much a victim of the Wyrms as anyone. She didn’t need revenge. She needed to stop the Wyrms. “Zerif!” she called more loudly.

The man fixed his bloodshot gaze on her. “What ... what have you done to me?” he said, his voice shaking. “What’s happening?”

“There’s no time to explain,” Abeke said, racing to the edge of the lava pool. There was a groaning crunch as a huge crack ran up the length of the tower, which had begun to slow its rotation. The strain of Erdas was too much for the snare. “The bell has put you in control of the Wyrms,” she said. “You have one chance to stop it.”

“Stop it ... ?” he said blankly. Zerif glanced down at his gray hands, which were still pulsing with the black veins of the Wyrms.

Cracks spread up the volcano walls, raining down rubble. Abeke shielded her face as huge chunks of stone fell around her.

“The tower won’t last much longer!” she screamed. “Zerif, *please!*” The idea that she was pleading with *Zerif* of all people to stop the Wyrms was beyond comprehension. But she had no choice.

What was a hero but someone who had chosen *one time* to do the right thing? Shane had saved Abeke from Uraza. Kovo had built the snare.

Could Zerif kill the Wyrms?

“I can’t force you to do anything,” she said. “Either you kill the Wyrms now, or you will spend the rest of your life enslaved to it.”

The stone tower cracked in half, falling into the molten pool, which swallowed it whole. The whirling lava stopped churning and started to drain back into the earth. Abeke could feel a static prickle in the air as Erdas pushed back against the turning. The swirls of water cutting across the stone floor exploded into a scatter of droplets.

“There’s no time!” Abeke screamed.

All around her, the Greencloaks and spirit animals were calming down—their minds returning to their rightful bodies. The Redcloaks had begun to stir. Zerif staggered to one side, doubling over in pain. When he looked up at her again, one of his eyes had turned to black. “*Ssstopp meeeee?*” he hissed in the voice of the Wyrms.

“Fight back, Zerif!” Abeke cried.

Zerif planted a hand against the rumbling tower, the other pressed to his temple. “Get out of my head!” he roared. His one human eye was clenched shut, streaming tears. She could see him fighting the Wyrms for control.

“Do it!” she begged.

Zerif screamed like a man being torn in two. With a desperate cry, he pushed himself away from the tower and staggered toward the lava, leaping from the edge of the rock—

The moment his feet left the ground, his body contorted and spun around. The Wyrms took control of his body once more. Black tendrils shot outward, flailing in the air as it plummeted down into the chasm and the churning lava.

Abeke scrambled to the edge and watched as the Thing that was Zerif disappeared beneath the fiery surface of the magma.

She sat back, breathing hard. Abeke stared at the lava, still terrified that the creature might somehow pull itself free. That it had somehow survived.

But then she heard the voices behind her. Not just one, not just a dozen, but *hundreds* of voices. Men and women, muttering to one another in bewildered tones. Abeke turned around to see Greencloaks, many of them kneeling on the floor of the cavern, some in tears. Those who could walk

had rushed to the sides of the Redcloaks to help them. The Greencloaks' faces were battered and bleeding from the fight, but their eyes—their eyes showed the clear glint of humanity.

The Wyrn was truly gone.



HUNTER AND PREY

ABEKE TIGHTENED HER HAND AROUND THE GRIP OF her bow. It was a crude weapon—she had carved it from the soft limb of a baobab tree. Usually, baobab would be terrible for bows, with not enough tension in the string. But this baobab, like every tree in Erdas, was changed now, its roots infused with the power of the revived Evertree. She could feel *life* coursing through the pores of the bow's grain, connecting with her hand, her spirit.

Abeke ducked down, hearing a rustling in the bushes below. She was in the hot jungles of Stetriol. Sweat beaded her brow. The jungle floor was thick with vines and brush, and so she had been forced to make her way through the canopy of trees, carefully climbing from limb to limb. She had been living like this for weeks, barely eating or sleeping.

She was a hunter. And she would have her prey.

Below her, the jungle wildlife ticked and croaked—oblivious to her presence. It had been months since the destruction of the Wyrn at the hands of Kovo's ancient snare. For one brief moment, all of Erdas had been transformed. Spirit bonds across the world were reversed. Seas had drawn back from the shores. Storms had raged in the sky. The Wyrn, housed inside Zerif's body, had been plunged into the burning whirlpool in the center of Erdas. And then, just like that, everything had returned to normal.

But of course, everything *wasn't* normal. The Wyrms had left one final gift to the world it tried to destroy. The power that fueled the Wyrms was washed into the tides. Every spring began to bubble with the same power that fueled the bond between humans and beasts. Every blade of grass and flower and tree became a smaller version of the Evertree.

The world was connected in new ways. Abeke didn't know what this meant for Erdas. She hoped it was good.

But amid that new life, there was still pain.

Abeke recalled the moments after the death of the Wyrms. A stillness had settled over the molten ruins in the Frozen Sea as the humans and beasts who had been possessed by the Wyrms' parasites recovered—blinking as if waking from a slumberless dream.

Abeke could still hear the haunting wails of grief that rang out inside the volcano as the Greencloaks regained their minds and recalled the horrific things they had done while under Zerif's control.

They were free of Zerif perhaps, but they would forever be captive to their own guilt.

Mulop, again restored to Niri, had been able to speak with Kovo underground, and arranged a reunion. Abeke and Rollan managed to get passage to Eura, where they met Conor and Meilin, who had emerged safely from the tunnels of Sadre. Takoda was with them, too, his hand intertwined with a pale girl named Xanthe's.

For the first time in centuries, the Sadreans and the people of Erdas met and communed with one another. This was important, because it would take every living soul to repair the damage Zerif and the Wyrms had done. Every port Abeke and Rollan passed, they saw firsthand the destruction that the Greencloaks had wrought.

When Abeke finally saw Conor and Briggan waiting for them at the shore, she leaped clear off the edge of her ship onto the decks and sprinted toward him at a full run.

Conor, like the other Greencloaks, had recovered from his parasite infection. But just like them, he was haunted by his actions while under the Wyrms' control. All traces of the youthful shepherd had disappeared,

leaving him looking older, more wary. And just like the Greencloaks, he now had a thin, colorless scar on his forehead, only visible in certain light.

Rollan and Meilin were surprisingly awkward upon seeing each other again. Rollan, usually quick with a joke, said almost nothing, while Meilin rambled on with uncharacteristic speed. Neither made eye contact, or even tried to approach the other. It wasn't until Jhi padded next to Meilin and shoved her straight into Rollan—forcing them into an accidental hug—that things began to turn back to normal.

They were a family restored—all of them together once more.

All but one.

Beyond the safety of her friends, Abeke had one all-consuming concern: What had happened to the Great Beasts that had been bonded with Zerif?

This was a question no one could answer. Not even Mulop, with his powers, had been able to sense Uraza's presence. Some people speculated the Great Beasts had died when Zerif hurled himself into the lava. Others said that they had been released into the burning currents beneath Erdas and spread to a thousand shores.

But soon enough, reports began to arrive of Great Beasts being spotted all across the world.

A gallant elk emerged from the mists of Northern Amaya one morning, appearing to a tribe of nomadic hunters. The elk walked unworriedly through their encampment as the hunters gaped on, until it had reached their young healer.

In Southern Zhong, a crowded marketplace erupted into chaos one steamy evening as an enormous elephant appeared from the jungle, wearing silks across its back and bracelets on its tusks. A small grinning girl sat astride it, waving to the crowd.

In Eura, a band of pirates was arrested when their ship crashed near a port city. They claimed an eagle had ripped their sails to shreds just as they tried to seize a merchant vessel. After leaving a steaming present on the hull of their pirate ship, it landed on the arm of a girl with a dignified squawk.

One by one, every Great Beast reappeared—

Every beast but one.

Abeke didn't know why Uraza remained hidden. Soon after the death of the Wyrn, the spot on her arm where Uraza's tattoo *would* be began to tingle, which she took as proof that Uraza was out there somewhere. But for some reason, the Great Leopard had not tried to find her.

Then again, maybe Abeke already knew why. Every night as she went to sleep, her dreams returned to the horror of a possessed Uraza killing Shane—her sharp teeth locked around his lifeless body. And then she felt the wrenching pain of letting fly her own arrow straight into her spirit animal's side.

At first, when Abeke had told her friends that she needed to leave in search of Uraza, they had tried to come with her. But she explained that she needed to do this alone. For six months, the huntress had kept her ear to the ground, searching for rumors of the great Uraza. The rumors had taken her to nearly every continent, but everywhere she went, she found nothing.

Now, at last, her search had brought her to Stetriol. The last place on Erdas. The jungles here were dangerous. Beasts that had once been enslaved by the Bile lurked in the untamed wilds—their anger at humans meant that more than a few of them would be happy to eat her if she wasn't careful. But she couldn't turn back. She knew she was close. She *had* to be close.

Her arm seemed to sense the spirit bond between her and Uraza. The tingling sensation grew, until she could almost feel it vibrating as she came closer to her prey. Abeke wanted to call out, to let Uraza know she was there, but she was afraid to frighten her off.

There was a rustling in the jungle beneath her. Abeke turned around and saw something watching her from the shadows. Something with flashing purple eyes. The eyes held her gaze for a moment, and then a sleek golden leopard poured out from between the leaves.

Not since that first day in Okaihee had the sight of her spirit animal filled Abeke with such unrestrained joy. She nearly burst into tears right there.

Instead, Abeke just grinned, leaping down from the trees.

Uraza stepped forward, watching her tentatively. Abeke had expected the leopard to be angry with her, perhaps even fearful. Instead, she was surprised to see shame in Uraza's violet eyes.

Abeke extended a slow, shaking hand outward. Just as slowly, the leopard brought her face forward—and nuzzled into her palm.

With that touch, everything was right again. Joy flooded through Abeke like rain on a parched savannah. Suddenly she *was* crying, harder than she had let herself cry in a long while.

Apologies would come with time. Apologies and forgiveness. For now, Abeke's body was electric with relief. Unsure what to do with this sudden rush of energy, she *whooped* into the trees.

Uraza purred heavily, slinking away. Her eyes flashed with a playful gleam. Abeke suspected that her spirit animal had some ideas for how to celebrate their reunion. In seconds, the leopard had disappeared into the brush.

Abeke's face split into a smile as she followed Uraza into the trees.

The hunt was on.

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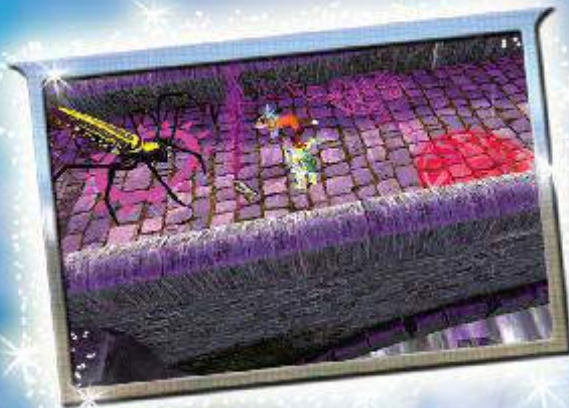
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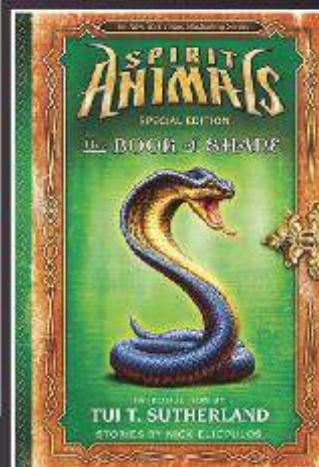
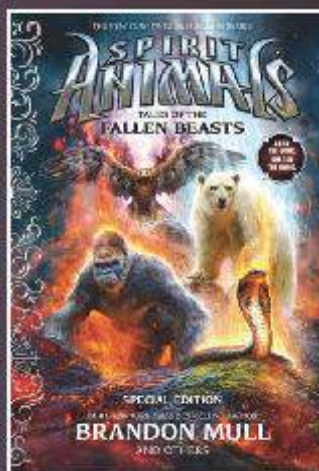
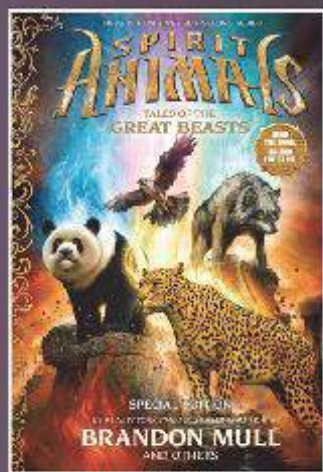
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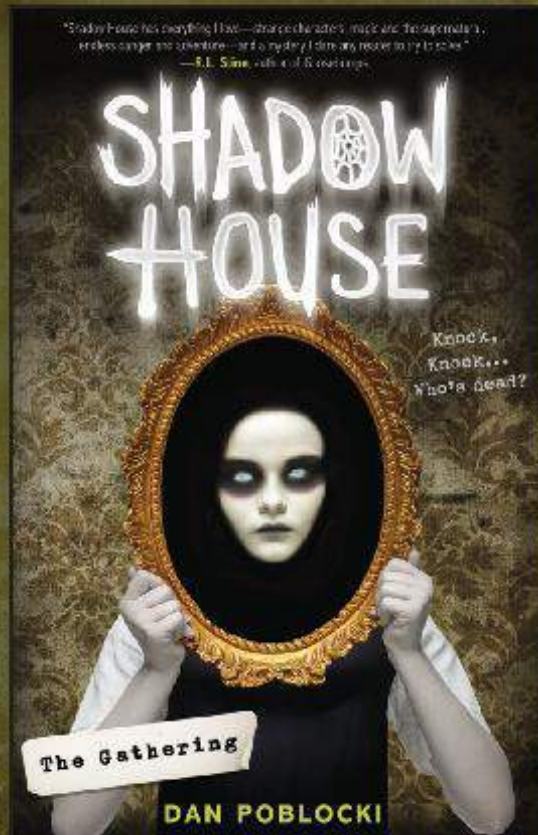
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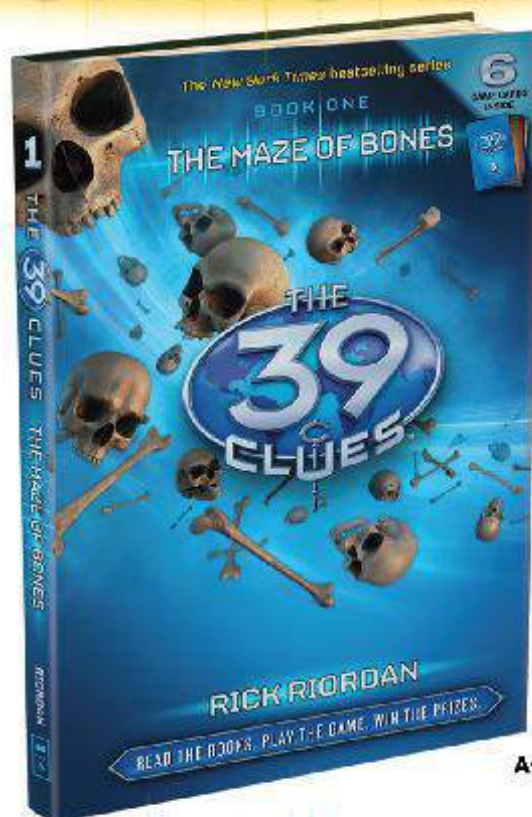
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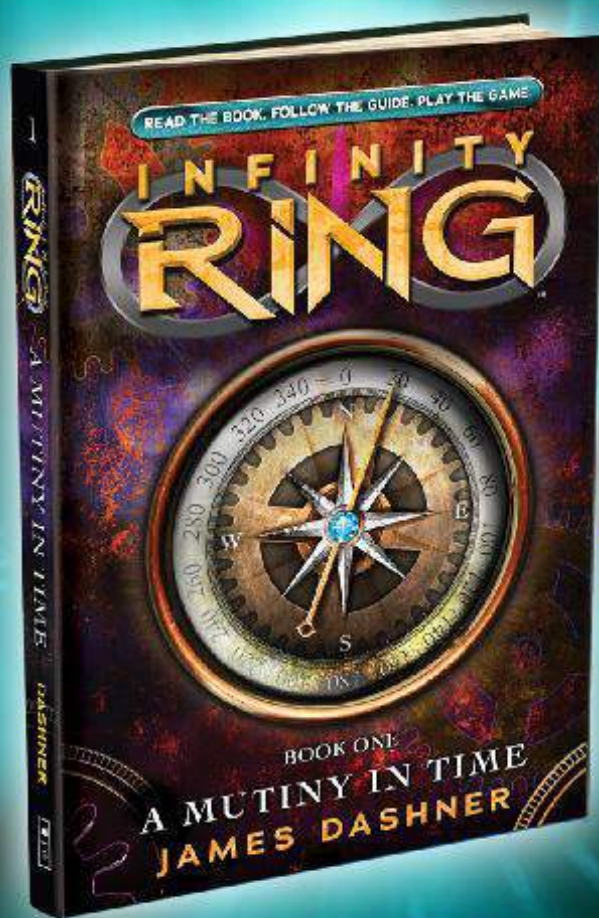


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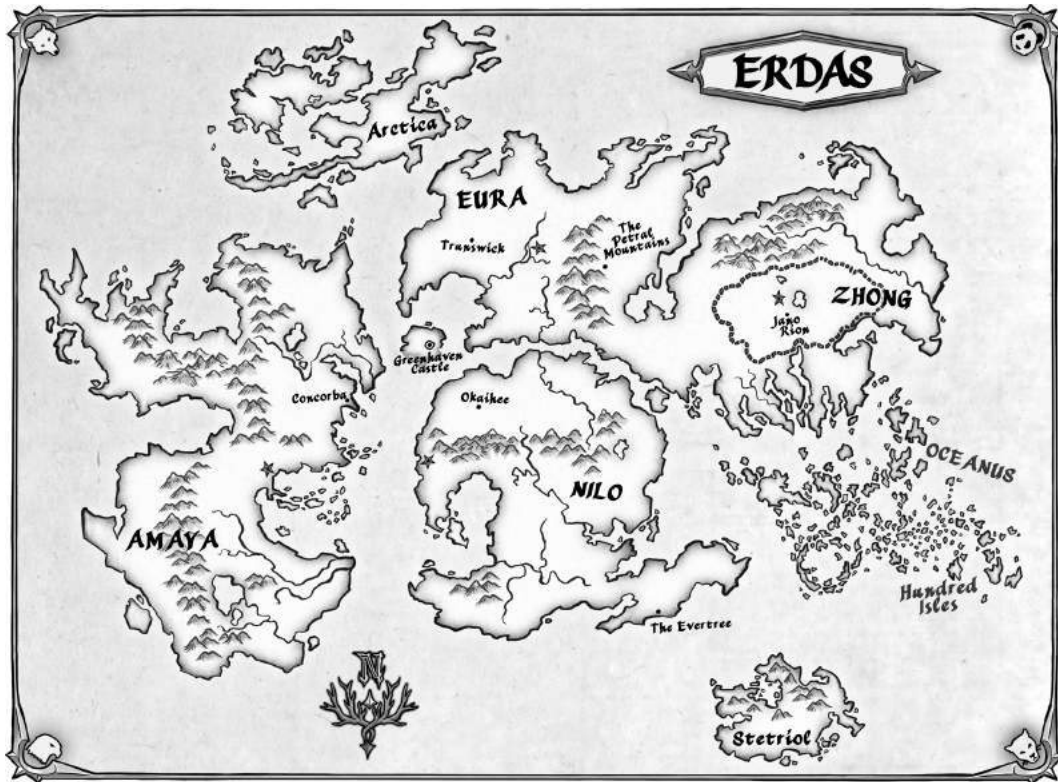


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To all the Greencloak readers and your spirit animal companions.

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PRINCESS SONG

PRINCESS SONG, DAUGHTER OF THE EMPEROR OF ZHONG, paced her chamber in the Council Citadel. Soon the leaders of the four main governments of Erdas, plus Stetriol, would meet for the first time since they'd gone into hiding during the turmoils of the Devourer's invasions and the Wyrn's attack.

A certain princess had not been invited to this meeting.

She was not happy about it.

Song remembered to make her steps small and dainty, not the sweeping strides she felt like taking. From the outside, she knew she looked serene, her black hair braided and held in place with jewel-tipped pins, her robe exquisitely embroidered in the colors of deep ocean green and rich emerald. Inside, her heart fluttered. She wanted to be more than decorative. She was determined to be a princess in deed and not just in name.

From the hallway came the sound of heavy footsteps, a guard speaking, and then the heavy door of Song's chamber swung open. The Emperor of Zhong entered, followed by two of his Oathbound guards, both wearing plain black uniforms with brass wrist protectors and brass neck-collars that kept their chins held high. The blank-faced Oathbound took up their stations on either side of the door.

The emperor was a big man dressed in ceremonial armor made of lacquered and gilded bamboo. It clattered when he walked. He wore his

hair long in a warrior's braid, even though, Song knew, he hadn't fought in the war against the Devourer. He had been in hiding, guarded by his loyal Oathbound, just as the Queen of Eura, the Prime Minister of Amaya, and the High Chieftain of Nilo had been. Now that the danger had passed, they all had taken up their old positions again, ruling the world.

"Daughter," the emperor said in a deep, commanding voice.

Song lowered her eyes, folded her hands gracefully together, and bowed low, showing deep respect. "Father," she said softly.

As she straightened, her father's sharp eyes studied her, looking for any fault, any blemish. Song held herself still under his gaze. His eyes narrowed as he saw the emerald and ocean of her embroidered robe—green was not a favored color at the moment. "I understand you wished to speak with me," he said.

Song bowed again. "Yes, honored Father. With your permission, I would like to attend the meeting of the Council tomorrow."

"The meeting is for the leaders of Erdas," he responded.

Song clenched her hands together, then forced herself to relax. She couldn't let him see how much this meant to her. "Please, Father," she begged.

The emperor observed her again for a long, judging moment. His mouth settled into a strict line, and Song knew what his answer would be before he spoke. "No," he said. No further explanation, no justification.

"But—" Song blurted.

Her father raised a hand, silencing her. "The meeting is no place for a dutiful daughter."

"I will not speak," Song promised. "I will only be an observer."

His face stayed as still as if it had been carved out of jade. Song knew that look. He was angry.

"It will be good," she said quietly, "if the other leaders of Erdas can see that your daughter survived the recent conflicts. Thanks to your care and foresight." She glanced quickly at the guards who flanked the door. "And the loyalty of the Oathbound."

The straight line of his mouth relaxed. Slowly the emperor nodded. "Very well. But you will remain silent and standing behind my chair."

His gaze flicked over her again. “And you will wear a robe of a more suitable color.”

Song lowered her eyes so he would not see the sudden wave of fury that had risen in her. Always he treated her this way, as if she were an object—a beautiful doll—but not his living, breathing daughter. Carefully she bowed. “It will be as you say, Father.”

As the emperor turned and left the room, Song held her bow until she heard the Oathbound guards close the door behind him. Then she straightened. If she could have seen her face in a mirror, she would have noticed that her mouth was set in the same straight line as her father’s.

She would attend the meeting, but not as mere observer. She would not stay silent. The Council—and her father—would hear what she had to say.



THE CITADEL

“I DON’T LIKE THE LOOK OF THIS PLACE,” ROLLAN SAID, gazing up at the Council Citadel. It was a massive castle built of dark-gray stone, quarried from the Petral Mountains, which loomed behind it like a bank of storm clouds.

From the road where she stood with Rollan, Meilin, and Conor, Abeke could see that the Citadel consisted of a huge central tower; jutting out from it were four “wings,” each built in the style of one of the four main lands of Erdas. The brightly colored flags of Nilo, Zhong, Eura, and Amaya hung from a wide gateway in the main tower, but they couldn’t hide the fact that half the Citadel’s windows were broken. Moss encrusted the slate roofs, and several of the walls looked ready to buckle under their own weight.

To Abeke, the Citadel looked like what it was: an important building that had been neglected for a long time.

Meilin’s nose wrinkled. “It is a little run-down, isn’t it?” She stood next to Rollan. Jhi was a furry black-and-white boulder at Meilin’s other side.

“More than a little,” Abeke said. She pointed at the part of the Citadel that had been built in the blocky style of a Niloan fortress. “Do you see the holes in the roof there? If it rains, anybody sleeping in those rooms will wake up in a wet bed.” She glanced over her shoulder at Conor, who stood half a pace behind the other three.

Abeke waited for him to add something, to make a comment about the Council Citadel. But he did not speak. The fight against the Wyrms had ended months ago, but it was clear to her that Conor was still gripped by the horror of what the Wyrms' parasite had done to him. The Wyrms had affected many of the Greencloaks. She and Uraza had been marked by it, too, but somehow it had been worse for Conor. At least he had the strong, steadfast support of Briggan, who never left his side.

Just as she had Uraza. Abeke felt the leopard sitting close beside her—closer than usual, trying to reassure her that their bond held, after it had been so cruelly ripped apart by Zerif. Uraza's ears were pricked, and her long, fluffy tail curled around Abeke's ankles. Abeke smiled at Conor, trying to get a smile from him in response.

Conor looked away, rubbing his forehead as if it ached. *Maybe it does*, Abeke thought. The Wyrms' hideous black spiral had pulsed on Conor's brow for many days. The mark was faded now, but Abeke knew better than any of them that the horrors of the Wyrms could not be easily forgotten. If Conor needed her, she vowed to herself, she would be there for him.

"We'd better go inside," Meilin said. "We don't want to be late."

"We already are late," Rollan added. Overhead, Essix flew in a wide circle, a distant shape against a cloudy gray sky.

"Olvan and Lenori and the rest of the Greencloak contingent must be here already," Abeke said.

"And we would've been on time," Rollan put in, "if a certain black-and-white bear hadn't stuffed herself with an entire forest of bamboo and then needed three days to recover."

"It's not Jhi's fault her favorite food just happened to be growing beside that inn," Meilin protested.

When they'd received the summons from Olvan, Meilin and Rollan had been traveling together to see Jano Rion, the city where Meilin had grown up. Conor, Abeke knew, had been with his family near Trunswick. She hoped they had taken good care of him, but she knew the simple shepherds couldn't really understand everything that had happened to him. After re-bonding with Uraza in Stetriol, Abeke had gone to see Kirat and Cabaro in Nilo.

She had missed her friends, but it had been good to have a rest—and to go out with Uraza and her bow and a quiver of obsidian-tipped arrows, hunting for gazelle. She and Uraza had been about to travel farther south to visit her family in Okaihee when the summons had arrived. As eager as she'd been to see her friends again, she had enjoyed a little time without the excitement and worry that came with being a Greencloak. And not just any Greencloak—one of the Four Heroes of Erdas.

Obeying Olvan's summons, the four of them had met up at Greenhaven, but they had arrived too late to travel with the rest of the Greencloaks. After hurrying to cross Eura, they had taken a coach that left them a mile down the road from their destination, to give their animals some time to stretch their legs (or wings, in Essix's case) before they were cooped up in the Citadel.

The Four Heroes of Erdas, along with Briggan, Jhi, Uraza, and Essix overhead, headed for the Citadel's main gate, a stone arch with a raised portcullis that looked like a row of iron teeth. The flags of the four lands fluttered in the breeze.

"No Greencloak flag," Meilin observed.

Abeke wasn't sure what to think of that.

Five guards dressed all in black, armored with brass vambraces and collars, watched as the four kids approached. All the guards wore swords sheathed at their hips, but only one of them was Marked, a big woman with pale blond hair cut very short. Around her upper arm was coiled a slim brown snake. As the leader of the guards, she held up a hand, stopping them. The snake twined down her arm and threaded itself through her fingers. Its tongue flickered, tasting the air.

Conor stepped up beside Abeke. "I know that kind of snake," he whispered to her. "It's from Eura, a stone viper."

"Is it dangerous?" Abeke asked.

Conor nodded. "It's not often seen. It hides under rocks, but its bite is deadly poisonous. Its venom turns its victims into stone, and they can only be saved by an antidote."

"Halt," ordered the Marked woman. "I'm Brunhild the Merry." The woman's already sour face deepened into a frown. Abeke wondered if perhaps "merry" was a family name. This person certainly didn't look

very happy to see them. “I demand that you state your business,” Brunhild barked.

Meilin pointed at her green cloak, then at Jhi. “These make our business pretty obvious, don’t you think? We’re here as part of the Greencloak contingent.”

“The Greencloaks arrived yesterday,” the woman named Brunhild said. Her voice sounded slithery, almost like a snake’s. “They didn’t say anything about a bunch of kids joining them. This is a gathering of the leaders of Erdas. You have no standing here.”

“Excuse me?” Rollan said, folding his arms. “We’re not just *a bunch of kids*. We saved the world.”

“Twice,” Abeke said.

“Heroes of Erdas,” Rollan added. “Maybe you’ve heard of us?”

“You think I’ve heard of four sniveling brats?” the guard sneered.

“*I’m* not a brat,” Rollan said. He glanced aside at Abeke. “Are you a brat?”

“No,” Abeke answered. “And I don’t snivel, either.” She had a bad feeling about this. Clearly Uraza did, too; she felt the leopard grow tense, ready to pounce. She laid a hand on her spirit animal’s head, steadying her.

Meilin sighed loudly. “Enough. We don’t want a fight.” Jhi lumbered to her side and sat, as immovable as a wall. “The Greencloak leader, Olvan, summoned us. Whether he left word about us or not, we’re supposed to be here.”

“I don’t think so,” snapped Brunhild the Merry. She put a hand to her sword and took a swaggering step forward. “You may not enter. Now leave here, *Greencloaks*.” She hissed the last word as if it were a curse.

Beside Conor, Briggan emitted a low, rumbling growl. The thick ruff of fur at his neck bristled.

In response, the guard held out her hand; the snake that was coiled around her wrist reared back as if ready to strike. Abeke saw the glint of poison dripping from its retractable fangs.

Conor’s hand was on his ax. Meilin drew her own sword and took up a fighting stance. Abeke fixed her eyes on the snake, ready to use her bow to block its strike if it came for any of them.

“Don’t let them enter the Citadel!” Brunhild the Merry ordered. The other four guards surged forward, drawing their swords.

“No blood!” Meilin warned as Abeke nocked an arrow. Abeke nodded, understanding. They were not going to gain entrance to the Citadel by wounding or killing its guards. They *had* been invited; they shouldn’t have to invade!

With a yell, one of the guards chopped a sword at Meilin, who coolly sidestepped it and nodded for Briggan and Conor to deal with him. Three more guards converged on her. Abeke saw Meilin smile slightly, and then suddenly she laughed and tossed her sword straight up into the air. As it spun upward, flashing in the light, Meilin elbowed one of the charging guards in the head, whirled to duck a sword thrust and swept the legs from a second guard, and then, as her sword reached the top of its arc and began to fall, she used a palm-strike to the chest to take out the third guard. The sword fell. As it reached her, Meilin snatched it out of the air by the hilt and waved its point threateningly over the three guards who writhed in pain at her feet.

Meanwhile Briggan had his powerful jaws clenched around the leg of a fourth guard—not enough to draw blood, but enough to make her screech and try to wriggle away. And Uraza had flattened Brunhild the Merry with one leap. The leopard had her front paws on the woman’s chest, so she couldn’t get up. Brunhild’s stone viper was nowhere to be seen.

Abeke wanted to laugh. The entire fight had taken less than ten seconds, and she hadn’t had to fire a single arrow.

“Look out!” she heard Rollan shout, and turned to see ten more black-clad figures armed with swords and spears pour out of a guard house next to the Citadel gate.

Uraza snarled, and Abeke drew back her bowstring. There *was* going to be blood after all.

Abeke was about to let an arrow fly when she heard a high voice call, “Stop!” She saw a swirl of green silk as a black-haired girl strode from the gateway and stepped between the Citadel guards and the four Greencloaks and their spirit animals. She was tiny, no taller than a ten-year-old child, but her face was very beautiful and she looked their own

age, or maybe a little older. When she spoke, her voice was commanding. “Stand down,” she ordered the guards. To Abeke’s astonishment, they immediately sheathed their swords and grounded their spears. The guards the Greencloaks had defeated scrambled away, picking up the weapons they’d dropped during the fight.

Brunhild the Merry climbed to her feet, then stepped back and bowed her head. There was still no sign of her stone viper. “Your Highness,” she murmured.

The girl nodded briskly, then turned to face the four Greencloaks. For a moment Abeke caught a glimpse of something in the girl’s face besides beauty—power, maybe, and determination or anger—and then whatever it was became hidden as the girl placed her tiny feet together, primly folded her hands, and nodded gracefully.

“I, Princess Song, daughter of the Emperor of Zhong, welcome you. I beg you to forgive these guards. They are Oathbound, and thus are sworn to protect the leaders of the four lands, and so they acted hastily, seeking to bar you from the Citadel.”

Abeke lowered her bow. She, Conor, and Rollan all looked at Meilin, hoping she would respond. Not because she was from Zhong, like Princess Song, but because she had been trained in etiquette and knew best what to say in situations like this.

Meilin straightened and sheathed her sword. Looking every inch the daughter of a high-ranking Zhongese general, she nodded to the princess. “They did act too fast. As you saw, we had no trouble with the first five guards. We could have easily taken the rest of them, too.”

Abeke heard Brunhild the Merry give a derisive snort.

“It may be so,” Princess Song said. She turned a frowning gaze on the guards. “These are the Heroes of Erdas,” she explained to them. “They are the young Greencloaks who so bravely fought the Devourer and helped save us all from the Wyrms. Brunhild, you and the other Oathbound were in hiding with the leaders, so you did not witness their acts of bravery. You should do these young people honor.”

Reluctantly the Oathbound guards bowed.

“Now,” Princess Song added, “I will bring the young Greencloaks to their chambers.” She turned to lead the way into the Citadel.

But before they could follow, Brunhild raised her hand, stopped them. “A moment, Your Highness,” she interrupted. “Perhaps you forget the rules of this place.” Her mouth stretched into an ugly, particularly un-merry smile. “The Greencloaks cannot bring their spirit animals inside.”

“What?” Abeke asked, not understanding. They couldn’t exactly leave their spirit animals outside, while they went in.

Brunhild folded her brawny arms across her chest; her snake, which had remained hidden during the fight, slithered onto her shoulder, where it rested its slim head, watching them with slitted red eyes. “To be admitted to the Citadel, you Greencloaks must put your animals into their passive states.”

“Yours isn’t,” Meilin argued.

“Because I am a loyal Oathbound, a protector of the leaders of Erdas,” Brunhild said smugly. “*You* are Greencloaks. Clearly not to be trusted, since you attacked us just now without provocation.”

That was an outright *lie*! The Oathbound had attacked them first. Abeke opened her mouth to protest, but fell silent when Meilin shook her head and drew the three of them aside for a quiet word. “I hate to say this,” Meilin whispered as they put their heads together, “but they’re not entirely wrong.”

“No, they’re only completely wrong,” Rollan put in, his voice low and angry.

“Yes, Brunhild was lying about us attacking the guards,” Meilin said, “but they do have a reason not to trust us.”

Abeke saw Conor reach up to rub his forehead, where the mark of the Wurm had been, and she knew what this meant.

“Oh,” Abeke breathed. “It’s because so many of the Greencloaks were taken by the parasites and forced to serve the Wurm.”

Meilin nodded reluctantly. “A lot happened when Zerif had his own little personal army of Greencloaks. We may be mistrusted by some people who don’t know the full story.” She cast an apologetic glance at Conor, who wouldn’t meet her eyes. “I think we’ll have to do as they say.”

“I don’t like it,” Rollan said flatly. As if responding to his anger, Essix dove, swooped low over their heads, then arced back into the cloudy sky.

“I don’t like it, either,” Meilin shot back. “But I don’t think we have any choice.”

Slowly, the four of them straightened. Meilin reached up to ruffle the black fur behind Jhi’s ears. Without speaking, she held out her arm. She would never *order* the panda to take the passive state, not after their history together, but she would hope for the best. Jhi sighed deeply and then disappeared, reappearing as a black-and-white tattoo on Meilin’s forearm. “As you see,” Meilin said to Princess Song and the Oathbound guards. “We will abide by the Citadel rules.”

“You do us great honor,” Princess Song said softly.

Conor had already called Briggan into the passive state. Seeing as she had no choice, Abeke stroked a finger over the fine fur of Uraza’s nose and then gave the leopard a nod. Uraza disappeared with a flash.

Rollan stood with his hands on his hips, gazing up at the sky. His green cloak was more ragged and faded than the newer cloaks the rest of them wore. It fluttered in the breeze. Essix circled high above, riding that breeze, showing no sign of descending again.

“Well?” Meilin asked him.

“She has no intention of coming down here,” Rollan said, not taking his eyes from the bird.

Meilin rolled her eyes, then nodded at Abeke and Conor. “You two had better go in and get settled. We’ll wait out here until Essix is feeling more cooperative.”

“It could be a while,” Rollan put in.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m so patient,” Meilin replied.

“*You*, patient?” Abeke heard Rollan say, and then Meilin said something in response that made him laugh.



Abeke followed Princess Song and Brunhild through the huge gate of the Citadel; Conor trailed behind her, looking around with wide eyes. The flags of the four regions flapped overhead, and the sharp iron teeth of the portcullis seemed about to take a bite of them. Abeke shivered, already missing the reassurance of having Uraza at her side, and hurried to keep up. The princess was tiny, but she walked swiftly, sweepingly, as she led

them up a set of broad stairs to the main double doors of the Citadel's central chamber.

"You are Abeke, are you not?" Princess Song asked, falling into step beside her. At Abeke's nod, Song glanced back at Conor, who lingered behind them. "I hope you can answer my question. I have heard that one of you—Conor—was taken by the Wym. Is this so?"

Abeke glanced quickly back. Conor's face was blank, but he was only a step behind; he must have heard the princess's question.

"By one of the Wym's parasites," Abeke corrected.

"I'm sorry to have to ask this," Princess Song went on, "but he served your enemy. Are you certain that you can trust him?"

Abeke raised her voice, to be sure Conor would hear her next words. "He served the Wym against his will, and he is free of it now. He is just as trustworthy as the rest of us."

"That's not saying much," blond Brunhild put in, casting a suspicious glare over Conor.

Abeke felt her temper rise at the guard's remark, but she took a deep breath to calm herself. They'd had one fight at the gate; she couldn't start another one already.

They entered a huge entrance hall hung with curtains of cobwebs and dust. Princess Song flagged down a passing man dressed in plain brown. "This servant will direct Conor to his rooms in the Euran part of the Citadel, and I will bring you to your rooms in the Niloan wing, Abeke."

The brown-clad servant bowed and gestured toward a passage leading away. Conor started toward him.

"Wait," Abeke said abruptly, and Conor paused, looking over his shoulder at her with raised eyebrows. "Do you have separate rooms for all four of us?" she asked the princess.

"Of course," Song answered. "There is a place for Rollan in the Amayan wing, and I've requested that Meilin be given rooms next to mine in the Zhongese wing."

Abeke shook her head. Conor seemed all right to her at the moment, but he shouldn't be left alone. With Briggan forced into the passive state, Conor needed his friends around him. So did she, for that matter. "We will share a room," she said firmly.

Princess Song blinked. “All four of you?”

Conor rejoined them. “Yes,” he said, nodding. “That would be good.”

The big Oathbound guard was standing behind Princess Song. “I know of a good room for them, Your Highness,” Brunhild said smoothly. She set off toward another hallway. Abeke, Princess Song, and Conor followed. “Though a prison cell might be the best place for the likes of you Greencloaks,” Abeke heard Brunhild add under her breath.

Abeke came to a sudden stop. Conor crashed into her from behind, but she kept her feet. The Oathbound guard and Princess Song turned to face her.

“I am not one to make threats,” Abeke said quietly. She felt Conor’s warmth behind her; his presence gave her words weight and strength. “So listen well, Oathbound,” she went on. “We are not called the Heroes of Erdas because we spent the Second Devourer War or the struggle against the Wyrms hiding in a bunker. We have fought, and we have lost much, and some of us have suffered in ways you can’t even imagine. You will not say bad things about Conor, or any of the Greencloaks, or you will have me to answer to. Do you understand?”

Brunhild went pasty pale and fell back a step. Her stone viper was nowhere to be seen. “Y-yes,” she stammered. “I understand.”

Beside her, Princess Song raised a finely etched eyebrow. “Clearly, Abeke, you are fierce, just like your leopard spirit animal.” She turned to face the guard, frowning. “These are honorable Greencloaks, Brunhild. Treat them as they deserve. Do you understand?”

Cringing, Brunhild bowed deeply. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Princess Song gave Abeke and Conor an apologetic look. “I beg your forgiveness, young heroes. The Oathbound mean well. There’s been so much destruction and confusion in the last year. And after so long serving as guards, they long to act.”

“It’s all right,” Abeke said. On the one hand, Meilin had been right—the Greencloaks didn’t have the best reputation at the moment, so the Oathbound couldn’t be faulted for their bad attitudes. On the other hand, she thought the Oathbound could bear watching. They might be loyal guards, but it was possible that they could be dangerous, too. And clearly Brunhild did not live up to her name.



A MESSAGE

WHEN HE'D FIRST JOINED THE GREENCLOAKS, CONOR'S dreams had been powerful, prophetic. On their very first mission, he'd had a dream so vivid it had felt like real life—he had dreamed about Arax the Ram and the path to find him. Later, it had been his dream that had sent the Greencloaks to Stetriol for the final battle against Gerathon and the Conquerors, a vision that had led them to victory.

Now, every time he closed his eyes, his dreams were filled with black tendrils that reached out and pulled him into a sea of oozing slime. He struggled against the writhing tentacles, but they gripped him firmly, thrusting him toward four red eyes that arose from the darkness and glared malevolently at him. Then a huge, leechlike mouth appeared and gaped wide, revealing rows of triangular teeth dripping with corrosive acid.

The Wyrms!

Its grating shriek filled his head. The spiral mark on his brow amplified the sound until it was everywhere; there were no more Greencloaks, no more friendship or hope or light, no more Conor. He was the Wyrms and the Wyrms was him, and that was all.

The maw of the Wyrms gaped wider. The tendrils dragged him closer.

No! he shouted in his dream, struggling.

"No!"

And then he felt a hand on his arm, and he fought his way out of the oily darkness, opening his eyes to see someone gazing down at him, her brown eyes soft and worried.

Abeke. It was Abeke.

He took a ragged breath that was almost a sob.

“It’s all right,” she said quietly. She was on her knees next to the low bed. He remembered where they were. The room they’d been given was tiny, with one rickety bed, blank stone walls, a narrow slit of a window, and an inch of dust covering everything. In the distance was the sound of hammering—the Citadel being fixed up after years of neglect. Despite the noise, Conor had been so tired after their journey from Greenhaven. He’d sat down on the low bed just for a moment....

He swallowed, his throat dry and raw as if he’d been shouting.

Maybe he had been. “I must have fallen asleep,” he croaked. Slowly he sat up, leaning his back against a stone wall. It was cold and clammy. A swirl of dust glinted in the dim light that shone through the narrow window.

Abeke shifted to sit next to him. “Another nightmare?”

Conor nodded.

“The Wyrms?” Abeke pressed.

“Yes,” Conor admitted. He reached up to rub the lingering ache in his forehead.

Intercepting his hand, Abeke pushed up his shirtsleeve, exposing the shape of Briggan in his passive state, a dark mark on his pale skin. Then she placed her own arm next to his, the mark of her leopard a swirling spotted shape on her warm brown skin. “We both suffered,” Abeke said. “The Wyrms took Uraza from me, and it took you from yourself.” She stroked a hand over her tattoo as if petting the leopard. “But we came through it. We survived. And we’ll keep surviving. We defeat the Wyrms every day that we go on.”

Conor stared down at the marks of Briggan and Uraza, side by side. Somehow seeing them together made him feel better, even without the comforting feel of Briggan’s rough head under his hand. He thought about how Abeke must feel. Her bond with Uraza had been shattered. And ...

“Do you still think about him?” he asked.

“About Shane?” Abeke asked. At Conor’s nod, she went on. “Yes. I’m still not sure how I feel about him. It’s complicated. He betrayed me—more than once. I fought a duel against him, and it was the angriest I’ve ever been in my entire life. But he died saving me when Zerif forced Uraza to attack.” She shook her head sadly. “Shane was my first friend.” She leaned closer and looked into Conor’s eyes. He saw wisdom in her face, and hope. “But you are my truest friend.”

Conor wasn’t sure what to say. As someone who had worn the Wurm’s mark on his forehead, did he deserve a friend like Abeke? He was saved from having to respond when the door banged open and Meilin and Rollan strode into the room.

And stopped short, looking around.

“*This* is where they put us?” Rollan asked. “A closet?”

Meilin ran a finger over the sill of the narrow window. It came away coated with dust. “I see they got it ready for us.” She pointed at the bed. “Are those sheets clean?”

“Probably not,” Abeke said, getting to her feet. The bed creaked alarmingly as she stood up. “What have you two been doing for all this time?”

“Oh, you know, waiting for Essix,” Rollan answered. He tapped his chest as a way of telling them the falcon had finally gone into the dormant state. He leaned against the wall as if he was tired, then slid bonelessly to the floor. “Also we spent some time being glared at by those Oathbound guards. And we did some sparring.” He nodded at Meilin. “She kicked my butt.”

“As usual,” Meilin said primly.

“I tried to get her to teach me that throw-the-sword-in-the-air thing she did out there by the gate,” Rollan said. “You saw it?”

Abeke and Conor nodded. It had been an amazing move.

“Yeah, well,” Rollan went on with a wry grin, “when I tried it I almost cut my own hand off.”

Meilin’s smug smile turned into a frown as she looked around the room, hands on her hips. “You know, I think this room could be a message for us.” Reaching behind her, she closed the door. She crouched

on the floor, and the others leaned closer to hear what she would say. “Listen, there’s something very strange going on here.” Meilin spoke in a near whisper. “It’s supposed to be an important meeting of the leaders of the four lands, but it seems as if the Greencloaks are barely tolerated. And they *really* don’t like our spirit animals.”

Conor nodded. From everything he’d seen in the Citadel, this was true.

“Brunhild—who isn’t very merry, by the way—gave us some more trouble on our way here,” Abeke put in.

“Not surprising. The Greencloaks have a complicated history,” Meilin reminded them. “But even with that, it’s weird.”

“Maybe we got too comfortable being heroes,” Conor said quietly.

Meilin watched him for a moment, her dark eyes pitying. “Maybe,” she said, nodding. “But I have to wonder: If they dislike us so much—if they don’t believe we are truly heroes—then why did they invite us and the other Greencloaks to the Citadel? What is really going on here?”



THE EMPEROR

BEFORE THE OTHERS WERE AWAKE, MEILIN SLIPPED OUT of their tiny room. It was located high in a crumbling tower of the Euran wing of the Citadel. As she descended the spiral staircase, she stretched her arms over her head and worked the kinks out of her back. She had asked the servants for more sleeping pallets, but they'd been little more than thin pads laid over the hard stone floor of the tower room. She didn't want to be stiff and sore if they had challenges to face while they were here.

A few brown-clad servants eyed Meilin as she crossed the entrance hall on the way to the Zhongese part of the Citadel. At those doors, she was stopped by an Oathbound guard, who looked her over suspiciously. Meilin had been well trained as a warrior and as the daughter of a general. She knew how to give orders that would be obeyed. After fixing the Oathbound with a regal glare, he bowed and admitted her. She wanted to talk to Song. The imperial princess had helped the four Greencloaks at the gate. If Meilin was right and something strange *was* going on, then she might be a valuable ally.

As Meilin stepped from the dusty, echoey entrance hall into the Zhongese section of the Citadel, she paused for a moment, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. The air was scented with tea and jasmine incense and boiled rice. Smelling it, she felt a sudden, fierce homesickness. It was accompanied by a wave of sorrow for her father, killed on a battlefield during the Second Devourer War.

She and Rollan had been on their way to Jano Rion, the city she'd grown up in, when they'd received the summons from Olvan. They would go back someday soon; maybe Abeke and Conor would come, too.

Opening her eyes, Meilin went on. The Zhongese servants must have been hard at work, for there was no dust in this part of the Citadel, and a glistening carpet covered the stone floor of the passageway. A servant hurried before her, then opened a wooden door carved with Zhongese water dragons, ushering her into a big, bright room hung with embroidered tapestries. The furniture was made of black-lacquered wood and was draped with jewel-toned silk and plump pillows with tassels at every corner. Seated before a low table was Princess Song. A girl stood behind her, putting a last pin into her gleaming black hair.

"Meilin!" the princess exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

Meilin bowed, keeping her face blank. "Your Highness."

Song gestured at the maidservant. "Tea, at once."

To her chagrin, Meilin's stomach growled, loudly. She hadn't had breakfast yet.

"And bring spiced buns," the princess added smoothly, "and some fruit." She seated herself at the low table. "Won't you join me?"

Meilin sat down, feeling uncharacteristically awkward as her sheathed sword bumped the table. The princess was so tiny, so perfect and delicate in her exquisitely embroidered robes. Song wasn't wearing green today, Meilin noted, but purple and deep blue.

"We have met before, haven't we?" Princess Song asked.

Meilin was surprised she remembered it. "Yes, Your Highness. Once. Briefly. A long time ago." Her father had been reporting to the emperor, bringing six-year-old Meilin with him so she could see the vast palaces. A few years older, Princess Song had been like a painted doll. The two girls had played stiffly and politely with the princess's toys, tiny perfect houses with tiny perfect people. Meilin had been reminded of those toys not that long ago when she and her Greencloak friends had gone to the artificially preserved village of Samis in pursuit of the Crystal Polar Bear of Suka.

"I have admired you for a long time," Princess Song said softly.

Meilin swallowed her surprise and called on her lessons in etiquette. One of the main things she had been taught was to conceal her emotions, to be always calm, self-possessed. She raised her eyebrows. “Indeed?” she said carefully.

“Yes.” Song fell silent as the servant girl set tea and food on the table and then left the room. “You are a brave and skilled warrior. I know how difficult it is for a Zhongese girl to study the martial arts.” She leaned over the table and touched the edge of Meilin’s cloak. “And to become a true warrior, as you are. A Greencloak. I have to admit that I envy you.”

Meilin felt a sudden burst of sympathy for the other girl. No doubt, as an emperor’s daughter, Song led a life of formality and quiet obedience. “We’re not just fighters,” she said after swallowing a bite of spiced bun, “and it hasn’t all been exciting adventures.”

“But you have loyal friends at your side,” Princess Song said.

Meilin took a drink of hot green tea. The princess, she realized, was lonely. “If you’re interested in learning to fight, I could teach you while we’re here.”

Princess Song’s cheeks went pink. “I am afraid ... it would not be permitted.” There was a rush of footsteps outside in the hallway. “But I thank you,” she added quickly, and rose gracefully to her feet. “It must be time for the meeting.”

Grabbing a spiced bun for each of her friends, Meilin stood, just as the door opened. Two black-clad Oathbound stepped into the room, followed by a big man who could only be the emperor.

He glanced at his daughter and nodded, then looked at Meilin, eyebrows raised. “A Greencloak—here?” he asked in a deep voice.

As Meilin bowed awkwardly, one of the spiced buns bounced out of her hands and rolled across the carpet, coming to a stop at the emperor’s feet.

He ignored it. “You are Zhongese?” he asked.

Her face flaming with embarrassment, Meilin answered, “Yes, Your Majesty. I am Meilin, the daughter of General Teng, who died fighting for Zhong during the Second Devourer War.”

The emperor nodded. “Your spirit animal is Jhi, the Great Panda.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Meilin answered. She couldn’t stop staring at the spiced bun. If he took a step forward, he would squish it.

“The children of Zhong who summon spirit animals should not be given to the Greencloaks,” he said grandly. “Especially when their spirit animals are the very embodiments of our history. They belong to Zhong.” And with that pronouncement, he turned and strode out of the room, followed by his loyal Oathbound guards.

“*Belong?*” Meilin repeated. She wished Rollan was there—he would have a smart answer to the emperor’s comment.

“Hurry, Your Highness,” called one of the guards. With a quick nod to Meilin, Princess Song rushed out of the room after them.

As she followed them out, Meilin swooped down and grabbed the spiced bun she had dropped.



Outside the Citadel meeting chamber, Meilin found Abeke, Conor, and Rollan waiting for her. Quickly she handed them each a spiced bun.

Rollan took a big bite of his, then looked suspiciously at it. “Gritty,” he mumbled through his bite.

Meilin gave him a bright smile so he wouldn’t suspect that his had been the bun that dropped on the floor.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said with an innocent blink.

“You’re staring at me.” Rollan rubbed at his cheek. “I have something on my face, don’t I?”

He did, in fact. Meilin still wasn’t used to seeing the scar that ran under Rollan’s left eye and across his cheek, a wound he’d sustained during the climactic battle to stop the Wurm. It had faded to pink and now was a thin line of white, but it was a reminder of what he’d been through.

Conor, she noticed, looked tired. His scars weren’t like Rollan’s—they weren’t visible. But they went deeper and would be slower to heal. Meilin hoped he was starting to recover.

Rollan nudged her arm and she looked up to see the leader of the Greencloaks, Olvan, with Lenori at his side; they were followed by a full

contingent of Greencloaks, some of whom Meilin recognized and some she didn't.

Other people were starting to gather. Many stared at the Greencloaks as they passed and muttered comments to each other. Meilin saw a proud-looking old man in Niloan garb with a retinue of Oathbound; he had to be the High Chieftain. He was followed into the meeting chamber by the Prime Minister of Amaya and her advisers. The prime minister had a face like a pickled plum, Meilin thought. Wrinkled and sour.

Last came the Queen of Eura, a young woman who was dressed in lace and velvet, with a fur-lined cape. As she crossed the threshold into the meeting chamber, the queen tripped over the edge of her long dress, landing on the floor in a heap of flounces. She shrieked, and three of her courtiers scurried to her side, lifting her to her feet and making soothing noises.

Olvan greeted the young Greencloaks with a nod. He had been taken by the Wym, just as Conor had, but he didn't seem to be as weary or troubled as Conor was. Perhaps he only bore the burden more easily. Lenori looked strange without her spirit animal, a gorgeously feathered rainbow ibis, on her shoulder, but she gave them a welcoming smile.

Olvan glanced over at the people streaming into the meeting chamber. "We had better get in there." He placed his hands on Meilin's and Conor's shoulders, drawing them all closer so they could talk without being overheard. "We thought this meeting would be a formality, but it seems there are some serious proposals on the table. Proposals about what to do with the Greencloaks."

Rollan narrowed his eyes. "Have they considered maybe just leaving us alone?"

It was a good question, Meilin thought. "They don't have any authority over us, do they?" she asked.

"These are the leaders of the four major governments of Erdas," Lenori reminded them.

"And Stetriol," Conor put in, pointing out the last leader entering the chamber, a young woman dressed in blue and black—an ambassador from the Council of Stetriol. She wore a pin with a silver *S* on her jacket.

“Right,” Olvan said. “Since Zerif used *us* to spread the Wyrms’ parasites across Erdas, there have been big changes in the world. These leaders are powerful people, and we have to work with them. Be careful in this meeting.” He fixed Rollan with a severe gaze. “And don’t say anything.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Rollan muttered.

“Oh, *sure* you weren’t,” Abeke whispered to him.

The four followed Olvan, Lenori, and the other Greencloaks into the meeting chamber.

The room was massive and echoing. Six stone walls towered over the proceedings, and banners representing each region hung from a very high ceiling; the same flags hung from five of the stone walls. It was more and more significant, Meilin decided, that the Greencloak flag was missing, even though there was a place for it.

In addition to the main entrance, there were doors in each of the walls. Tall windows let in the gray light from outside. In the center of the room was a huge six-sided wooden table. At the table sat the Niloan High Chieftain, the Euran Queen, the Ambassador from Stetriol, and the Amayan Prime Minister, one on each side. At a fifth side sat the Emperor of Zhong, with Princess Song standing quietly beside him. Oathbound guards stood at attention behind all the leaders.

Clearly the sixth side of the table was intended for the Greencloak contingent. There were no chairs.

From the beginning, Meilin had had a bad feeling about this; now the feeling got worse. They were supposed to stand—almost as if they were on trial, and all the lands’ leaders were the judges. She saw Olvan and Lenori hesitate for a moment, and then the two Greencloak leaders went to stand at their side of the table, their heads held proudly high. Meilin, Conor, Rollan, and Abeke stood just behind them with the other Greencloaks.

“I will begin,” said the oldest of the leaders, the Niloan High Chieftain, “by welcoming you here, to the first meeting between the leaders of the four great lands of Erdas in many, many years. Let us hope that this meeting marks the beginning of a new era of peace and prosperity.”

An adviser, standing behind him, leaned over to whisper something into the High Chieftain's ear. He scowled, then nodded. "The four great lands are represented here ... and Stetriol, of course." His dismissive glance showed what he thought of the island continent that had for so long been an enemy of the other lands. "We have much to discuss," the high chieftain went on. "The first issue on the table ... " His dark eyes surveyed the room. "What to do about the Greencloak problem."

"Problem?" snorted the Prime Minister of Amaya. "It's more than a simple *problem*."

She definitely resembled a pickled plum, Meilin thought. The woman's mouth was pursed in disapproval, and her nose wrinkled as if she smelled something foul.

"If she's not careful," Rollan leaned over to whisper in Meilin's ear, "her face is going to freeze like that."

Meilin stifled a smile. "*Rollan*," she chided. They needed to be on their best behavior.

"The Emperor of Zhong has asked to be the first to speak," the high chieftain went on.

The emperor nodded, his mouth set in a severe frown. "The Second Devourer War forced the leaders of Erdas into hiding, where we were protected by our Oathbound guards. Then, just as we emerged to begin rebuilding, another attack began. We heard stories of terrible violence. And this time, who was responsible for this destruction?" He raised his hand and pointed across the table, straight at Olvan. "The Greencloaks."

Beside Meilin, Rollan stirred, as if he was going to protest. She nudged him with her elbow. When he looked over at her, she shook her head. He gave a slight nod.

She knew he didn't like it. Neither did she. But she had a feeling that speaking now would just make things worse.

The emperor went on, his deep voice filling the room. "The very leader of the Greencloaks was taken by the Wyrms, spreading its corruption. As a group beholden to no nation, but with unparalleled access to all of them, they spread this corruption farther than any other force could have. It is clear to everyone here: The Greencloaks have become too powerful, and far too dangerous."

“This is true,” the Amayan Prime Minister added in a sharp voice. “They cannot be trusted.”

The Ambassador from Stetriol had a soft voice, but somehow she made herself heard. “We in Stetriol,” she began, as the others fell silent to listen, “have good reason to hate the Greencloaks, who for so long denied us the Nectar that would have prevented the bonding sickness. And yet ... ” Serenely, she looked around the room, making sure everyone was listening. “And yet we see the Greencloaks now as allies. With their aid, Stetriol is at last taking its proper place in the world—no longer outcast, no longer forgotten. We value the Greencloaks. For us, they are not a *problem*, but a solution.”

Meilin felt like cheering at the ambassador’s words.

But the other leaders, even the wide-eyed Euran queen, were starting to look like the prime minister: They were making that disapproving pickled-plum face.

The high chieftain was nodding. “Speaking of the the oh-so-precious Nectar. We all know that the Greencloaks jealously guarded the secret of its creation. Only *they* were allowed to administer its protective power. But now the Nectar Ceremony doesn’t exist,” the high chieftain said. “The Nectar of Ninani is no longer needed. The Greencloaks, too, are not needed as they once were.”

“Exactly,” boomed the emperor, and slammed a fist onto the table, claiming everyone’s attention. “And so I propose that the Greencloaks should be disbanded.”

Meilin gasped aloud. There were murmurs and nods of agreement from the other leaders. Except for the Ambassador from Stetriol, who frowned and gazed down at the tabletop.

The emperor went inexorably on. “Each of the Marked must be returned to their own nations, to serve their proper lords.”

So that’s what the emperor had meant by *belong*, Meilin realized. She found herself shaking her head. Looking aside, she saw the same denial on Abeke’s face. Beside her, Conor had gone pale. Break up the Greencloaks? This was *wrong*. So, so wrong.

But they had been ordered to stay silent. Olvan was the Greencloaks’ leader; he would speak for them.

To Meilin's dismay, Olvan's head had lost its proud tilt, and he was staring at the floor as if he couldn't think of a response. Beside him, Lenori looked troubled. It was true that some of the Greencloaks, including Olvan, had fallen prey to the Wurm, but they had served it against their will. *And* they had defeated it, in the end. *That* is what Olvan should tell the leaders.

But it was Princess Song who spoke next. Standing just behind the emperor's chair, she looked so small, like a child, and almost fragile. But when she spoke, her voice did not have the soft, sweet tones of a well-bred Zhongese girl. Instead, she sounded like a true leader.

"I disagree with my father," she said firmly. All the other leaders stopped their stirring to stare at her. The emperor's face went as still as stone. He folded his arms across his chest, as if denying his daughter's words.

The princess went bravely on. "Have you forgotten that the Greencloaks saved the entire world?"

"Twice," Meilin heard Rollan whisper.

"If not for the Greencloaks, the Devourer and his Conquerors would have destroyed everyone in this room," Song declared. "We owe them our lives. We owe them a place of honor in this remade world!"

Her words rang out, and the room fell into utter silence.

Then her father pushed back his chair and got to his feet, his face a mask of anger. Deliberately he stepped in front of Princess Song, blocking her from the table. "My daughter speaks without permission," he snapped. "The words of a disobedient girl mean nothing. Do not listen to them."

"We cannot break up the Greencloaks!" Princess Song insisted.

Her father whirled to face her, fury in every line of his body.

Meilin found she was holding her breath.

But before the emperor could act, all six doors leading into the meeting chamber banged open at the same time, the sounds echoing from the stone walls.

In each doorway stood a man or a woman wearing a green cloak.

They were here to help, Meilin thought, feeling relieved. They would speak to the leaders of Erdas about the Greencloaks' heroic actions in the

wars.

One by one, the green-cloaked figures brought their spirit animals out of their passive states. A hyena crouched at the feet of one, wild-eyed and drooling. A bat swooped over the head of another. There was a raptor of some kind; a small, lithe pantherlike cat; and a white rat with glittering pink eyes.

As one, the Greencloaks in the doorways drew their swords.

Wait. Were they going to ... ?

Before Meilin could shout out a warning, the Greencloaks and their animal companions hurled themselves into an attack.

There were screams. The room erupted into chaos.



BETRAYAL

“**W**HAT ARE THEY *DOING*?” ABEKE BLURTED OUT AS THE attackers stormed into the room.

Rollan glanced at her. Abeke’s eyes were wide and horrified.

“It looks like—” He broke off. “They’re Greencloaks, aren’t they?”

Rollan looked around wildly, seeing one of the green-cloaked figures stalk into the room. Her lithe, pantherlike jaguarundi, an animal from Amaya, crouched and then leaped toward the Ambassador of Stetriol, snarling. There was a shrill scream. Some of the leaders were shouting for the Oathbound guards to protect them. Another one of the attackers slashed with his sword, and blood spurted from the chest of one of the queen’s courtiers.

“Who *are* they?” Conor gasped, drawing his ax.

“We can’t fight them,” Rollan said, shaking his head. “They’re Greencloaks.”

At the table, Olvan had called forth his spirit animal. The mighty moose tossed its antlers, sending the white rat flying. “Call forth your spirit animals!” Olvan roared at the other Greencloaks. “Defend the leaders!”

Meilin was the first to leap into action. Ripping her sword from its sheath, she dove, sliding across the surface of the six-sided table just in time to stop the jaguarundi from advancing on Princess Song.

Roughly, Meilin grabbed Song and shoved her under the table.

“Stay there!” she shouted—and took up a defensive stance. If the invaders wanted to get to the princess, they would have to go through her. A moment later, Jhi was at her side.

Conor had already brought Briggan out of his dormant state. The wolf leaped and intercepted the hyena in midair. There was a crash of bone and fur and the gnashing of teeth.

Beside Rollan, Abeke had strung her bow and was taking careful aim at one of the invaders’ spirit animals, a huge bat with leathery wings that was swooping down and scratching at the eyes of anyone defending the leaders.

“Let Essix get it!” Rollan shouted to her, calling forth the falcon. As Essix streaked across the room toward the bat, Abeke nodded, then she searched out another target. Rollan heard Uraza’s roar as the great leopard came out of passive state.

All around Rollan was chaos, snarling, and screams. People stumbled past with blood streaming from their wounds. He caught a quick glimpse of Meilin, relieved to see her on her feet, still protecting the princess. Wielding his long knife, he cleared a space around Abeke so she could take aim without worrying about being attacked.

He blocked a thrust from one of the green-cloaked invaders, then kicked at the white rat, which was coming at him with its teeth bared.

There was a lull in the fighting. Everything fell suddenly into quiet while attackers and defenders caught their breaths and decided their next moves. In the silence, the Emperor of Zhong stepped onto a chair and then onto the top of the six-sided table.

“Traitors!” he thundered, pointing at the invaders. “The Greencloaks have shown what they truly are. *Traitors!*”

As if in answer, there was a growl from across the room. The steep-shouldered hyena, bleeding from where Briggan had slashed it with his sharp teeth, sprang past Meilin, past Olvan. It snarled, leaped onto the table, and tore out the emperor’s throat.

All watched in stunned horror as the emperor staggered back, blood spraying from his neck, and collapsed onto the tabletop. Rollan couldn’t even move. It had happened so suddenly.

The hyena bayed with bloody fangs, a howl of triumph.

It was answered by a shrill whistle—a signal—and the green-cloaked invaders and their spirit animals headed for the main exit, slashing and stabbing at anyone who got in their way. They plunged through the doorway. One of Abeke’s arrows thudded into the door just as it slammed behind them.

The room was thick with blood and the moans of the wounded. Several people were shouting.

The ones doing most of the shouting, Rollan realized, were the Oathbound. He hadn’t noticed them in the fight, but they must have defended the leaders.

He saw Meilin on the other side of the table, bending to help Princess Song out of her hiding place. Meilin tried to turn Song away from the sight of her father’s body, but the princess had a will of iron. She said something to Meilin and then jerked herself away.

Taking a deep breath, the princess pointed at a tipped-over chair. The Oathbound guard leader, Brunhild the Merry, leaped to set it upright.

Brunhild gave Song her hand, helping her to step onto the surface of the table.

“I must speak again,” Princess Song began, her voice steady. All in the room stopped what they were doing and turned to listen. She stood there, her hair tousled, her gown torn, a smear of blood across one pale cheek. At her feet, her father’s body lay in a pool of blood that was already growing sticky. Yet she did not waver. “In this attack, the Greencloaks have shown their true colors. Not green.” She bent to touch the table, then stood and held up her hand, which was covered with her father’s blood. “Their true color is red. Bloodred. My father was right. We have seen what they are—traitors.”

The princess stared at her own blood-smeared hand, and finally her control broke. She fell to her knees beside her father’s body and wept. With a tearstained face, she pointed straight at Olvan and Lenori. “Oathbound, don’t let the rest of the Greencloaks escape,” she ordered. “Arrest them at once!”



VENOM

CONOR KNEW ROLLAN WELL ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT he was going to do. “No time to argue,” he told his friend. Briggan bounded to his side, panting, his fur spotted with blood.

“But—” Rollan protested, gripping his knife.

“We can’t fight them,” Conor said. He sheathed his ax.

On the other side of the table, the Oathbound were gathering. Brunhild pointed at the remaining Greencloaks. As a group, they started across the room, drawing their swords, while Brunhild, four steps behind them, called forth her spirit animal, the stone viper.

“No, don’t,” Conor said, grabbing Abeke’s hand to stop her from drawing the last arrow from her quiver. “It’ll just prove what the princess said. We have to get out of here!”

The black-clad Oathbound guards were closing in, seizing the remaining Greencloaks and forcing them to the floor. Lenori’s spirit animal, the brightly colored ibis, perched on her shoulder and spread its wings, a distraction to the guards. Lenori, who hated violence of any kind, stepped forward with her hands raised, trying to explain to the guards that they had not been part of the attack.

“Arrest the Greencloaks!” shouted Brunhild.

As Princess Song issued crisp commands, Olvan put his moose into passive state and gathered up Conor, Abeke, and Rollan; Meilin was still

on the other side of the table. “You cannot be captured.” He started clearing their way to the door. “Come!”

“Meilin!” Rollan shouted, pointing at the door. Conor saw Meilin nod and then sheathe her sword. Jhi, huge and implacable, lumbered into two approaching Oathbound soldiers, giving Meilin a path of escape.

When they got to the door, Meilin quickly called Jhi into passive state. Olvan shoved them all outside, leaving Lenori and the other Greencloaks to hold off their pursuers. He almost caught Essix’s tail feathers in the door when he slammed it closed.

“To my room—the Euran wing,” he ordered. “Hurry!” Bringing his spirit animal out of the passive state again, he left the moose to guard the door while he and the others sprinted down the hallway that led to the Euran wing of the Citadel. As they fled, Conor heard the sound of the moose trumpeting a challenge, and then the clatter of running feet coming after them.

Breathless, they reached Olvan’s set of rooms, all decorated in a style very familiar to Conor—they looked like Devin Trunswick’s rooms back home in Eura.

When they were all inside, Olvan quickly closed the door, locked it, and turned to face the kids.

Briggan crouched at Conor’s side, his tongue lolling. Essix was nowhere to be seen, but Rollan didn’t look worried, so Conor knew the independent falcon was safe. Uraza was sleek gold and black as she padded around the edge of the room, sniffing at the heavy wooden furniture.

Conor noticed that Meilin was very pale. He saw Rollan edge closer, so his arm was touching hers. She swallowed and then clenched her teeth, as if holding in tears. Then he remembered that she’d seen her own father cut down on the battlefield—maybe the death of the emperor was making her relive that awful moment.

“All those Greencloaks were new recruits,” Olvan said, striding across the room to a carved chest. The box sat under a window with lots of tiny, diamond-shaped panes.

“Not *Greencloaks*,” Rollan said angrily. “*Fakecloaks*.”

Shaking off her distraction, Meilin nodded. “They were impersonating Greencloaks to make us seem like criminals.”

Abeke was busy checking the string on her bow. “But who are they, really?” she asked, looking up. “Who sent them? Who hates the Greencloaks that much?”

“The emperor,” Rollan answered. “Who’s dead.”

“Less chatter,” Olvan ordered, opening the chest under the window. “The Oathbound are just behind us. Meilin is right—there is no coincidence that this happened in front of the leaders of Erdas. Someone is trying to sabotage the Greencloaks. Lenori and I are certain to be blamed for this attack, and arrested.”

As if confirming his words, there was a rush of footsteps out in the hallway. A moment later came a loud banging on the door. “Open up!” shouted a booming voice.

“You four have a chance to get away,” Olvan said hurriedly, tossing clothes out of the chest, searching for something. “There is something you must do.” He paused. “Ah, here it is.” From the chest he took a cloth-wrapped object, about the size of a baby’s fist. “For many years, this gift has been passed down from one leader of the Greencloaks to the next. There is a saying associated with it: *When Greencloak fights Greencloak, that which is hidden must be revealed.*”

The door to the room shuddered under the blows of the guards trying to get in. The wood around the lock was starting to splinter.

“And now that warning has come to pass. Greencloak has fought Greencloak.” Olvan held out the small bundle to Meilin. “Take it.”

“What are we supposed to do with it?” Meilin said, taking the gift and shoving it into a little pouch that she wore on her belt.

Olvan was about to answer when Conor noticed that silence had fallen out in the hallway. He turned and saw a slim flicker of brown slither through the crack at the base of the door.

The stone viper—the spirit animal of Brunhild the Merry!

“Look out!” he shouted. He seized Abeke’s arm and pulled her away.

“What?” Rollan asked, looking for a threat coming through the door.

“Snake!” Conor pointed at the floor. “It’s fast! Don’t let it bite you!”

Briggan growled, on guard. “No!” Conor yelled. He gripped Abeke’s arm. “Don’t let Uraza near it,” he said urgently, and she immediately grabbed the scruff of the leopard’s neck, holding her back.

The snake was no bigger than a pencil, but moved with terrifying speed. As the Greencloaks backed away, the stone viper darted to the middle of the room and paused, its tongue flickering, sensing the location of each body in the room.

“Quick!” Olvan called, gesturing to another door. “Go that way. Straight along the passage, second right, then down the first set of stairs you come to. It’ll take you to the Citadel walls.”

As she hustled toward the door, Meilin asked her question again: “Olvan, what are we supposed to do with the gift?”

“Reveal it,” Olvan responded. He was about to add something when the snake made its choice.

Moving with lightning speed, it struck like an arrow, sinking its fangs into Olvan’s leg, just above his boot.

Conor gasped as the viper’s poison already began to take hold. First Olvan’s leg froze in a rigid stance, then his other leg, and then his arms.

Olvan spoke quickly as the stone venom crept over his chest. “You must find out who is trying to break apart the Greencloaks,” he wheezed. As he spoke, the poison crept up his neck to attack his face, turning his skin gray and pale. His breath rasped. “The same ... force will try to divide you.” His voice slurred, his mouth hardly able to move. “Stay true to ... each ... ”

The four kids stared in horror as the poison overcame Olvan. The big man’s body wobbled off balance, then he tipped over and crashed onto the floor. His green cloak settled over him.

At the same moment, the door splintered under the blows of the Oathbound guards.



ANKA

“COME ON!” MEILIN SHOUTED, FLINGING OPEN THE DOOR Olvan had said led to a way out of the Citadel. “It’s clear,” she said over her shoulder. “Let’s go!”

“What about Olvan?” Conor protested as the Oathbound fought their way past the door they’d broken open.

Rollan’s heart lurched at the thought of leaving Olvan behind. But they had to flee. “We can’t help him now,” he answered, grabbing Conor and checking to see that Abeke was coming. “He told us to escape, so that’s what we have to do.”

Snarling, Briggan and Uraza held off the Oathbound guards as the kids made it out of the room, then raced down the hallway.

“Olvan said we should turn at the second right,” Abeke called, a step behind Rollan.

“Second *left*,” Meilin corrected, and they pelted around a corner. Bounding, Briggan caught up to them, followed by Uraza, silent and deadly.

“Are you sure it’s left?” Conor panted.

“No!” Meilin shot back.

They reached a crossroads where two passageways met. Meilin looked right, then frantically left. From behind them came the sounds of pursuit, growing louder.

“I’m pretty sure it was straight,” Conor put in.

And then, suddenly, someone else had joined them.

“Gah!” Meilin shouted.

Rollan was used to seeing better than anyone, thanks to his connection to Essix, but the Greencloak who appeared at Meilin’s shoulder had come out of nowhere. It was a woman, he could see that much. But her features were oddly blurred and ... was her skin gray? Like the stone walls of the passageway?

“Where did *you* come from?” Rollan demanded.

“I’ve been here the whole time,” the mysterious Greencloak answered, “and I’m here to help. This way.” She pointed at a door that they hadn’t noticed, then flung it open and started down a set of stairs.

No, Rollan was certain. The door had *not* been there before! Had this Greencloak hidden it somehow?

Briggan growled. The Oathbound were after them. Rollan could hear their footsteps coming from Olvan’s room.

“Hurry!” called the Greencloak woman. “I can hide you!”

“Who *are* you?” panted Meilin as the four kids, Briggan, and Uraza rushed out of the passageway and onto the stairs, Conor quietly closing the door behind them.

“Shhhh,” hissed the Greencloak. “Shut up for half a moment, if you can.”

Rollan *so* wanted to snipe at her for that comment, but he saw the wisdom of staying quiet. The stairs were dark; even Rollan’s keen eyes couldn’t make out more than shadows. Their panting breaths sounded loud in the silence.

“Won’t they just open the door and come after us?” Meilin whispered to Rollan.

He shrugged, even though he knew she couldn’t see him in the dark. He was starting to suspect what the mysterious Greencloak’s spirit animal might be. If he was right, the guards wouldn’t even see the door.

From above came the sound of the Oathbound pursuers. Their feet pounding, they ran straight past the closed door.

Yep. Rollan’s guess was right.

“Come on,” whispered the Greencloak woman from ahead. “Follow me, and stay absolutely quiet.”

They did as she'd ordered, Conor putting Briggan into passive state and Uraza padding on stealthy paws at their backs. Essix, Rollan knew, was waiting for them outside, circling high above the Citadel.

At the bottom of the stairs they turned right, down another long, dark passage. At its end was a doorway leading to a courtyard, and then the outer wall of the Citadel. Rollan could hear shouts in the distance: the Oathbound guards searching for Greencloaks to arrest. A booming echo was the portcullis at the front gate slamming closed. They definitely weren't getting out that way. As he watched, two brown-clad servants rushed across the courtyard. The entire Citadel was stirred up, on the alert. Escaping was going to be impossible.

Unless ...

In the light of the doorway, Rollan got his first really good look at the new Greencloak. She seemed to have dark hair in a long braid down her back, and skin the same light brown as his own.

"Weren't you ... grayer before?" Rollan whispered to her.

She shot him an annoyed glare. "Yeah, they warned me about you," she said sharply.

"The smart one?" Rollan asked.

"Smart *mouth*, more like," she whispered back.

Rollan found himself grinning. He liked her already. "Chameleon spirit animal, right?"

He saw a flash of surprise cross her face. Then she gave a brusque nod. Rollan caught a glimpse of a small lizard-ish shape on her shoulder, blending in with the green of her cloak. Chameleon. Without the keen sight he got from his bond with Essix, he never would have noticed it. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Anka," she answered.

Meilin joined them. "I assume we're getting out that way," she whispered, pointing at a door in the outer wall of the Citadel, across a stone-paved courtyard. "But how are we going to get over there without being spotted?" As she spoke, two Oathbound guards clattered into the courtyard, swords drawn, clearly searching for the escaping Greencloaks. After seeing that the area was deserted, the guards rushed away.

“Now,” Anka whispered. “Quickly. If I say *still*, stand against the wall and don’t move.” She turned her glare on Rollan. “And don’t talk. Don’t even breathe.”

“But—” Meilin began to protest. Rollan knew her—she wanted explanations.

But they didn’t have time. “Just do it,” Anka said, and Rollan nodded to reassure Meilin.

Abeke had put Uraza into passive state, and the four kids, led by the mysterious Greencloak, Anka, started around the edge of the courtyard, keeping close to the stone walls that enclosed it. Behind them, the Citadel buzzed with activity.

They were halfway around the courtyard, ten steps away from the gate in the outer wall, when they heard the sound of Oathbound guards approaching—from the passageway they’d just left!

“*Still!*” came Anka’s swift order.

Obedying, Rollan flattened himself against the wall, his shoulder against Meilin’s, Anka beside him. He knew Conor and Abeke had done it, too. Not one of them moved.

Don’t even breathe, he told himself.

The two Oathbound took several steps into the courtyard, looking around. Their eyes passed right over Rollan and the others, but they didn’t react.

Without moving his head, Rollan looked aside at Meilin. He knew she was there, and his Essix-enhanced eyes had keener vision than most, but all he could see of her was the faintest of outlines. Thanks to Anka’s chameleon spirit animal, all five of them were invisible—they had blended right into the wall.

“They’re not here,” one of the Oathbound guards said, turning away. “Let’s check the other passageway.”

“Wait,” said the other, a tall man with a broad, handsome, brown-skinned face, framed by flowing black hair.

Rollan realized that the man was Marked. He carried his spirit animal in the crook of his arm—it was a fluffy, brown, almost wingless bird that had two nostril holes at the end of a long, thin beak. It was a kiwi bird,

from a small island near Stetriol, and it had a dangerously keen sense of smell.

Which meant the Oathbound who held it might not be able to *see* them, but his nose might tell him they were there.

Trying not to move, Rollan sniffed the air to see if he could smell himself. Uh-oh. He should have taken a bath at the last inn. The others were probably just as stinky.

In the center of the courtyard, the Marked Oathbound had closed his eyes and stood drawing in the air through his nose. The kiwi in his arms blinked its tiny black eyes.

Rollan held his breath.

Frowning, the Marked Oathbound opened his eyes again and looked carefully around the courtyard. He sniffed and took a step closer to where they were hidden.

“They’re not here,” his partner said impatiently.

“They *were* here,” the Marked Oathbound said. “And not that long ago, either.” Another sniff, and he shrugged. “But I don’t see them. We’d better report in.”

Rollan let out a relieved breath as the two guards hurried away.

At his side, Abeke looked confused. “He looked right at us,” she whispered.

Rollan opened his mouth to explain.

“Let’s go,” Anka interrupted, and started off before checking to be sure the kids were following.

Quietly, the five of them slipped through the door in the wall and into the forest that surrounded the Citadel. For a while they could hear the uproar as the rest of the Greencloaks were arrested and the Citadel was being searched, but the noise soon fell away behind them. They padded on quiet feet through a shadowy forest, where the ground was thickly carpeted with pine needles. Ferns brushed at their knees, and the high branches of the pine trees cut off the light.

“All right, that’s far enough,” Meilin said, stopping.

Rollan went to stand at her side, along with Abeke and Conor, who had brought their spirit animals out of passive state. Briggan sat at

Conor's side, and Uraza crouched at Abeke's feet, looking ready to pounce. Essix, he knew, was perched in a tree nearby, watching.

Anka turned to face them. Her skin, Rollan noticed, had taken on a greenish tinge, making her blend into the forest. "Weren't you ... browner before?" he asked her.

She shot him an annoyed look.

He grinned back at her. Having Anka around to aggravate was going to be fun.

"You're a Greencloak?" Meilin asked Anka, beginning the questions.

Anka turned to show off the green cloak she wore. "Obviously."

"There's nothing obvious about it," Meilin shot back. "At the meeting in the Citadel, there was an attack by Greencloaks. Olvan said they were new recruits. And we've never seen you before. How do we know we can trust you? How do we know you're not one of those false Greencloaks?"

"Fakecloaks," Rollan put in.

"I've been around," Anka said, folding her arms. "You just never noticed me."

Abeke made the connection. "Oh, I get it. The way the guards didn't notice us in the courtyard. Chameleon spirit animal?"

Anka gave a smug nod.

"Can we see him?" Abeke asked. She turned and spoke to Conor. "Chameleons are really cute. Have you ever seen one before?"

Conor shook his head. "Never."

"Toey is shy," Anka said, her usually sharp voice softening for the first time. "You might catch a glimpse of him now and then."

Meilin still looked suspicious. Rollan caught her eye. "She's telling the truth, as far as I can see," he told her. "I think we can trust her."

"Oh, *thank* you," Anka said sarcastically. "I save you from the Citadel and you *think* you can trust me?"

"We've seen betrayal before." Meilin's face was serious. She patted the pouch where she'd put the gift from Olvan. "And we have a mission. We can't be too careful."

Rollan saw Briggan prick up his ears and then nudge Conor's leg with his nose. In response, Conor cocked his head, listening. "Uh, we'd better

keep moving. I think the Citadel has sent somebody after us.”

“Oathbound,” Anka told them. “They’re expert trackers—we have to go. *Now.*”



SECRETS REVEALED

THE OATHBOUND WERE RELENTLESS.

They tracked the five Greencloaks all afternoon, never giving them time to rest or even catch their breaths. Abeke was glad she'd spent the months after the defeat of the Wurm hunting in Nilo. It meant she could run for a long time without getting tired.

As the sun set and the forest grew darker and colder, Abeke followed Anka through the pine trees, Uraza at her side and Meilin a step behind. Next came Rollan, with Conor and Briggan bringing up the rear.

The sounds of pursuit had fallen away behind them, but Abeke knew the Oathbound were following. Still, they had to rest sometime. Anka couldn't keep leading them on through the entire night. Or could she?

Abeke paused and let Rollan and Meilin pass her, and then fell into step beside Conor. Uraza and Briggan trailed behind them. "I keep thinking about Olvan," Abeke whispered. The last they'd seen of the Greencloak leader, he'd fallen to the floor after being bitten by the Oathbound leader's stone viper. "The snake's poison," she went on. "Do you think it killed him?"

"There is an antidote," Conor responded. He shot her a worried look. "They would give it to him, wouldn't they? They wouldn't let him die?"

"I hope not," Abeke said grimly. She wished she could go back to the Citadel and help Olvan, but she knew that all they could do was try to

fulfill the mission he'd given them. If they could figure out what they were supposed to do.

She checked Conor and saw he looked pale. Dark smudges under his eyes showed how tired he was. Because of the nightmares, he hadn't had enough sleep for weeks. Or for even longer—not since he had been taken by the Wurm. He couldn't keep up this pace. But she knew he wouldn't complain.

They walked on as night fell and a full moon rose above the forest, bright enough that they could see where they were going. Silver-edged shadows lurked beyond the path, and a cold breeze blew through the branches overhead.

After another hour of walking without the sounds of Oathbound pursuers, Anka called a halt. The four kids gathered around her. "Meilin," Anka said, keeping her voice low, "you said you have a mission. We need to know where we're going."

Meilin gave a weary sigh. "I have no idea what Olvan wanted us to do." She took the cloth-wrapped gift out of the pouch. "He gave us this and said it had to be *revealed*, whatever that means." Carefully, she unwrapped the gift.

In the pale moonlight, it looked like ...

"It's a *rock*," Rollan said.

Abeke tossed her braids over her shoulder and leaned closer to see. He was right. It was a scaly-looking black rock about the size of a baby's fist.

"Ah." Anka reached out a finger to touch the rock, then drew back. "I know what this is, and what you're supposed to do with it."

"*How* do you know?" Meilin asked suspiciously.

"You may not have noticed me before," Anka said, "but I am a Greencloak. And I know some secrets that have not been revealed to you."

"But you're going to reveal them now, right?" Rollan put in.

Anka looked around at the dark forest. There was no sound of pursuit. "We can sit and rest for a few minutes, and I'll tell you."

Relieved, Abeke and the other kids sank wearily to the ground. Uraza crouched close beside Abeke. Essix had flown down to perch on a

nearby branch. The moonlight filtered between the trees, pushing back the shadows. Despite the light, Abeke could barely make out Anka's figure; thanks to her chameleon spirit animal, she blended in with the night.

Anka spoke from the shadows. "This rock is not what it appears to be. It's one of a set of four items precious to the Greencloaks. Olvan knew this. Why didn't he tell you when he gave it to you?"

"We didn't exactly have time," Conor said. At his side, Briggan flopped down to lie with his big head on Conor's foot.

Anka nodded, understanding. "Olvan would have told you that long ago, the four regions of Erdas bestowed the Greencloaks with gifts as thanks for ending the First Devourer War. Four items wielded by four ancient heroes of Erdas—"

"Four items," Rollan put in, "wielded by four heroes?"

"Don't interrupt," Anka said sharply.

"Yeah, but I can't help but notice that me, Conor, Abeke, and Meilin add up to four," Rollan said.

"And you didn't even have to count on your fingers," Anka sniped. "Now be quiet so I can tell you the rest." She paused, then shrugged. "But it probably is important that there are four of you, each from a different region. It makes sense that this quest would fall to you. Anyway, the four gifts were symbols that the Greencloaks were of and for *all* Erdas."

"Not broken up, as the leaders seem to want now," Meilin observed.

"No," Anka said. "Greencloaks united. Loyal to each other. Willing to serve all nations."

"So, back to the rock that is more than it seems," Rollan reminded her.

"Yes." Anka pointed to the rock. "As its gift, Amaya sent a legendary polished jewel called the Heart of the Land. As you can see, it's been disguised somehow, and it must be revealed. Zhong gave something called the Dragon's Eye. Nilo and Eura gave gifts, too, but I can't remember their names. The gifts, all except for the Heart, have been hidden."

“And we have to find them,” Abeke realized. “If there are four gifts that are meant to show the four lands that the Greencloaks are for everyone, then we need to find them all.”

“We should reveal the Heart first,” Meilin said. “Like Olvan ordered. The only question is how?”

“Amaya,” Anka said softly. “I don’t know much, but there’s a place in the region that’s connected to the gift.”

“Wait a minute,” Rollan said, pointing at the rock. “We have this object, right? And we’re supposed to collect these other objects and use them to save the world? Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?”

“No,” Meilin answered. “Before, the Greencloaks had to save the world—”

“Twice,” Abeke and Conor said at the same time.

“But this time,” Meilin went on, “*for* the world, we have to save the Greencloaks.” She held out the rock, a dark lump in her hand. “So we’ll take up this quest to reveal the Heart of the Land and then find all the gifts?” she asked.

“Yes,” Abeke said without hesitating, putting her hand onto Meilin’s, feeling the rough surface of the rock under her palm.

“Yes,” Conor agreed, putting his hand over hers.

“Definitely,” Rollan said, and put his hand on the top.

“For the Greencloaks,” Meilin said solemnly.

“For the Greencloaks,” Abeke, Conor, and Rollan repeated.

Abeke looked around at her friends, the three people she trusted most in the world. Anka, she realized, had faded completely away. For a moment, Abeke felt sorry for her. The chameleon made it so she was always around, but never noticed.

Then Abeke’s keen senses went on the alert. While they’d been talking, the wind had stilled and the forest had grown completely silent. Too silent. Fog was creeping in, flowing like long, white snakes between the tree trunks.

Anka appeared again, standing a few paces farther down the path. She whirled to face the kids. “We’ve stopped for too long. The Oathbound are coming.”

Abeke leaped up. “We can’t let them catch us.”

As she stood, Meilin wrapped up the Heart of the Land. She quickly stowed it in her belt pouch.

Abeke checked Conor. He was getting to his feet slowly. “Are you all right?” she asked him.

“I’m fine,” he answered, but she didn’t think he was.

Essix took off from her branch, quickly disappearing into the night. “So we’re heading for Amaya?” Rollan asked.

“Less talking, more running away,” Anka said, appearing at his side. “They’re coming. Let’s go!”

Wearily slinging her bow over her shoulder, Abeke got ready to run for the rest of the night.



WIKAM THE JUST

THE ROCK WASN'T HEAVY, BUT MEILIN FELT THE BURDEN of carrying it.

For three days and three nights they traveled through the forest, with the Oathbound in pursuit. Anka led them along the southern coast of Eura, heading for a port where they could get a ship to Amaya. The Oathbound wouldn't be able to track them over the sea, so they'd be free to reveal the rock and find the other three gifts that had come down to them from the time of legends.

But the four Greencloaks and Anka still had to get away from their pursuers. They slept only in snatches, with one person on guard, until all of them felt so weary it was like they were carrying loads of bricks on their backs.

One day at sunset, they stopped in a clearing in a pine forest to eat a cold dinner—they made no fire to give them away to the trackers—and huddled together, shivering, as the twilight advanced. During the day Anka had left them for a time, to slip into a village and buy supplies. At least, Meilin hoped she'd paid for the food; with her chameleon spirit animal, Anka would probably make a very good thief. Maybe that was why Rollan seemed to like her so much, despite her sharp voice and her short temper.

“What am I eating?” Rollan asked, inspecting the food Anka had given him.

“Meat,” she answered.

“I don’t even want to ask this question,” Rollan said, taking a bite, “but what kind of meat?”

“The chewy kind,” Anka answered.

“Mmm,” Rollan mumbled. “My favorite.”

Conor, Meilin noticed, had fallen asleep already, with his head on Abeke’s shoulder, his dinner uneaten.

Meilin was glad for Jhi’s warm, furry bulk at her back. With a sigh, she ate her serving of “meat” and a hard biscuit, and listened to Rollan and Anka talking.

“So this quest we’re on. How do we reveal what is hidden?” Rollan asked. He shifted closer, so his shoulder was touching Meilin’s.

“Greencloak lore says that the rock is called the *Heart of the Land*,” Anka answered. “And it comes from Amaya, where there is a place called the Heart of the Land. An island in the middle of the large lake that lies to the northeast of Concorba.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of the lake,” Rollan said. “So we have to go there?”

“It’s the most likely place.” Anka’s voice answered, but Meilin couldn’t see the young woman anymore; she’d faded away as the forest grew darker.

“Can we rest here tonight?” Abeke whispered. “Conor needs to sleep some more.”

Anka didn’t answer, so Meilin spoke for her. “We’ll stay for as long as we can.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes. As the sun set completely, the moon rose, flooding the clearing with silvery light.

“If the rock is from Amaya,” Rollan asked, “and *I* am from Amaya, why didn’t Olvan give it to me to carry?”

“Because I’m the responsible one,” Meilin said, smiling to herself.

Rollan bumped her shoulder with his, and she heard him laugh.

Then it occurred to her that maybe Rollan *should* be the one carrying the Heart of the Land. She sat up. “Anka said the four gifts were *wielded* by four heroes. That means they must have some power, don’t you think?”

Anka answered from the shadows. “It is likely that the gifts are more than just symbols. We just don’t know what power they have.”

Meilin dug the rock from her pouch and unwrapped it. “Here,” she said, holding it out to Rollan. “Take it.” When he did, she asked, “Do you feel anything? Any connection? Any power?”

Rollan closed his hand around the bumpy rock, waiting to see if anything happened. “Nope,” he answered at last. “Nothing.”

“Because it’s hidden. It hasn’t been revealed yet,” Anka said impatiently. “Until then it really is just a rock.”

Rollan handed it back to Meilin, and she put it away again. She leaned back against Jhi, who sighed and shifted to make herself more comfortable. Looking up at the sky, she saw the pinpricks of stars. Something drifted across her vision. It was a faint thread, glinting in the moonlight. Sleepily, she watched it unspool across the clearing. Then another silvery thread floated past, just overhead. They looked like silk. So pretty.

Across from her, Conor jerked awake. “They’re coming,” he blurted.

Meilin sat up and listened. She heard nothing but the wind in the trees. “Are you sure?” Maybe it was another one of Conor’s bad dreams.

Abeke was getting to her feet, checking her bow and quiver, which had just one arrow in it. “Yes, he’s sure,” she said, as Conor stood up with Briggan beside him.

Meilin stood as well, then offered her hand to Rollan. She hauled him to his feet. “I don’t hear anything,” he said.

“Shhh,” cautioned Anka. “They could be sneaking up on us. Put your animals into passive state. We’ll go quietly, and I’ll hide us, just in case.”

Without speaking, the five Greencloaks left the clearing. Meilin led the way. Thanks to Anka’s chameleon, when Meilin glanced over her shoulder to check on the others, they all looked like nothing more than shadows gliding through the darkness. Essix, who refused to go into passive state unless it was absolutely necessary, flew from branch to branch. The falcon flew on silent wings and wouldn’t give them away.

The path was like a dark tunnel before them. Meilin paced along it, trying to stay quiet. As she walked, a thin thread of spidersilk broke across her face. She brushed it away and kept going.

Then, ahead, she saw an entire spiderweb stretched across the path. It was about the size of a shield, and it glinted in the moonlight. A little

dark blob of a spider sat in its center.

Meilin was *not* afraid of spiders. At least, that's what she told herself. Ever since she and Abeke had seen Shane's sister, Drina, killed by her own spider spirit animal, she'd felt a little queasy about them. And then there had been the Webmother in the dark passages of Sadre. She tried to think of spiders as mice. Cute, furry, baby mice that happened to have eight legs and completely creepy eyes. And fangs ...

As Meilin cautiously approached the web, she reached to sweep it out of her way. But the threads were like glue—they stuck to her arm. Two more steps, and another web appeared in her path, at the same height as her head. Before she could duck, she'd stepped into it—and the sticky threads wrapped around her face like a net. “*Ick,*” she whispered.

She stumbled to a halt, trying to wipe the web out of her eyes.

“What's the matter?” Rollan whispered, right behind her.

“I'm just ... stuck!” she answered. Finally she managed to scrape it away, just in time to see something plummet from the trees and land at Rollan's feet.

“Essix!” Rollan exclaimed, and crouched beside her. The falcon was wrapped entirely in sticky spiderweb. She shrieked, outraged.

A skittering sound came from the forest all around them.

Meilin caught a glimpse of something moving through the branches.

No, not *something*. Lots of things—spiders, *thousands* of spiders. They were led by one spider larger than the others, which moved with uncanny intelligence.

In a flash, she realized what was happening. “One of the Oathbound has a spider spirit animal!” she shouted. And it had called other spiders to help it spin webs to entrap them.

“Run!” Abeke yelled.

Rollan scooped the entangled Essix into his arms and sprinted past Meilin.

Meilin started to follow when she heard a shriek from behind and turned to see Abeke wrapped in web, struggling to get free. Conor was frantically ripping at webbing that had covered his feet, holding him in place.

A second later, Meilin felt something—a mouse-sized spider crawling up the back of her neck. More spiders leaped at her from the trees, trailing threads of sticky web. As she went to draw her sword, another web, as wide as a net, drifted down from the trees, covering all five of the Greencloaks. They fought as it settled over them, but the harder they struggled, the more tangled they became, until they could barely move. Spiders crawled all over them, as if checking to be sure they were really caught. Meilin shuddered as a spider walked right over her face.

“Now I know what a fly feels like,” Rollan gasped as he tried to protect Essix’s feathers from the web.

When they were completely trapped and all five of them had fallen to the ground in one squirming, web-covered lump, Meilin saw dark shapes emerging from the trees. They were dressed in black, with the distinctive brass collars and wrist-guards. One of them was unusually tall and thin, with parchment-pale skin and deep-set eyes. Gripping his bony shoulder with huge talons was a hunched, black-feathered bird with a cruelly hooked beak and a wrinkled red head.

“That’s Wikam the Just,” Meilin heard Anka whisper. “One of the Oathbound’s leaders. His spirit animal is a vulture, and it’s a lot more dangerous than it looks. Listen,” she went on quickly, “Wikam is not to be trifled with. His name might be *Just*, but he *will not* treat you fairly. Don’t even bother trying to argue with him.”

“I suppose you mean me,” Rollan muttered.

“*Shhhh*,” Anka hissed, sounding worried.

One of the other Oathbound gave a signal, and the swarm of spiders skittered off into the forest—except for one spider, his spirit animal, which scurried up his body to perch on his shoulder. The spider was small, brown, and furry—and really, Meilin had to admit to herself, nothing at all like a mouse. The moonlight glinted from its many-faceted eyes.

Wikam the Just folded his long arms and looked them over. “Well, well, well,” he said in a deep voice that sounded like it was speaking to them from the other end of a cavern. “Look at you wiggle, little Greencloaks. But we’ve got you now. You *will* face your punishment for attacking the leaders of Erdas.”

“But we didn’t do it!” Meilin protested.

“You know something?” Wikam sneered. “I actually believe you.” The Oathbound soldier leaned casually against a tree, his eyes sparkling with cruel amusement. “I just don’t care. You could be as innocent as ... well, as children. I’m going to bring you in anyway, and earn the glory for your arrest. You’ll be put on trial for assassinating the Emperor of Zhong. And when you are convicted—which you *will* be, after I reveal to the leaders that you confessed your heinous crimes to me—the penalty will be *death*.”



THE TORCH

DURING THE FINAL BATTLE AGAINST THE WYRM, THE Redcloaks' polar ice fortress, the Place of Desolation, had been rendered uninhabitable. Its lava tubes and mysterious markings from the Hellans were all gone now.

Ever since then, Stead, who had taken over as the leader of the Redcloaks after Shane's death, had been looking for a new place to make their headquarters. After scouting a few likely locations, he had decided to build a high tower on a remote beach on the south coast of Eura. Anybody who climbed to its very top could look out over the ocean and see the Greencloaks' castle on the island of Greenhaven, way in the distance.

Yes, Worthy had been up there. He was pretty sure that Stead's choice of a new location, and its view of Greenhaven, meant something. The Redcloaks were outcasts, and Stead wanted back in.

Well, *that* wasn't going to happen, Worthy felt sure. All any of them needed to do was look into a mirror to know why.

And yeah, he wanted in, too, though at the same time he rather liked his slit-pupiled golden eyes, not to mention the muscles he'd put on since he and his black panther spirit animal had merged. The retractable claws were good, too.

Still, Worthy saw Stead's point. Every one of the Redcloaks had made mistakes. Their late, great leader, Shane, had given them a reason for

being—to redeem themselves. And according to Stead, despite their honorable fight against the Wyrms, they weren't done yet.

Stead stood on the wide, sandy beach, watching the workers he had hired putting a few last touches on the tower. It was built of sand-colored stone, with a roof of hammered copper that glowed flame-bright in the setting sun. It was so bright that anybody standing on the walls of Greenhaven and looking in this direction could probably see it, shining like a torch across the water.

Maybe that was the point.

“Hey, I know what you should name the tower,” Worthy suggested. “The Torch.”

Stead didn't answer. He looked all heroic, with his mask in place and his red cloak curling around his legs in the sharp breeze off the ocean. Waves crashed against the sand, and seabirds circled overhead. At Stead's feet, Yumaris squatted, picking with gnarled fingers through a pile of seaweed and shells that smelled like dead fish. She couldn't see what she was doing—she was more worm than human, really—but she sniffed at the sand and nibbled at the seaweed and seemed perfectly content.

Unlike Worthy. He sighed loudly, waiting for Stead to tell him why he'd been summoned. But Stead was becoming more and more like the spirit animal that was now part of him—as stubborn and hardheaded as a ram.

As if sensing Worthy's impatience, Stead looked over at him. Worthy caught a glimpse through the mask of Stead's odd, rectangular pupils.

“I've had some reports,” Stead began.

Here we go, Worthy thought. He folded his arms and prepared to listen.

“The leaders of the four lands have come out of hiding,” Stead said. “A few days ago, they gathered for a meeting at the old Citadel, on the border of Eura and Zhong.”

“Yep!” Yumaris put in happily.

Worthy glanced down at the eyeless old woman. She was knotting bits of shell into her long, gray-white hair. Grinning with her toothless mouth, she draped a long scarf of seaweed over her shoulders.

“Very nice,” Worthy said to her.

In response, she cackled and then threw a handful of sand in his general direction.

Stead went on. “The reports say that something went wrong at the meeting. The Greencloaks attacked the leaders, an act of terrible betrayal. The Ambassador from Stetriol was wounded, and the Emperor of Zhong was killed.”

Wait, what? “The *Greencloaks* did this?” Worthy interrupted.

“Of course not,” Stead said impatiently. “According to my sources, the attackers had only recently joined the Greencloaks. Clearly they joined intending to carry out the attack. And now the leaders of Erdas are convinced that all Greencloaks are criminals. They have ordered their Oathbound to track down and arrest every single Greencloak left out in the world.” He pointed toward the island of Greenhaven. “Once they’re captured, they’ll be brought to their castle and imprisoned, and then they will all be put on trial.”

Worthy felt a twinge of uneasiness. “So who set them up? Who wants to destroy the Greencloaks?”

Stead shrugged. “No idea. One of the leaders, perhaps? The Greencloaks have plenty of enemies, especially after so many of them fell to the Wurm. They still have enemies in Stetriol, too, people who feel as Shane once did, that the Greencloaks were to blame for years of suffering by those who called spirit animals and didn’t have the Nectar to ease the formation of the bond. So you see, Worthy, it could be anyone. Even a fellow Greencloak gone rogue.”

“Or a Redcloak?” Worthy suggested.

“No,” Stead said flatly. “Definitely not.”

Worthy shrugged. As far as he could see, anybody was capable of anything. He wouldn’t count out one of the Redcloaks until he was absolutely certain. “So what do you want me to do?”

Stead nodded. “Our favorite group of young Greencloaks managed to escape the Citadel without being captured.”

Worthy felt his uneasiness growing. “You mean Conor and the other three?”

“Yes, the Heroes of Erdas,” Stead answered. “I want you to help them.”

“But they hate me,” Worthy protested. At least Conor did, and he had good reasons for it, too.

“Make them trust you,” Stead countered.

Worthy shook his head. “They are *never* going to trust me.” When Stead didn’t comment, Worthy went on, “I mean it. Never. Not ever. You’ve picked the wrong person for this mission.”

Behind his mask, Stead narrowed his eyes. “Think of it this way, Worthy: It’s your chance to be the good guy. The rescuer.”

Oh, Stead was good. He knew exactly what Worthy wanted—what he had always wanted, from before the time he’d failed to summon a spirit animal at his Nectar Ceremony. He wanted to be the hero. Like ... well, like Conor, who had been his servant, who he had treated as badly as he could get away with. Conor, who had summoned one of the Great Beasts and had gone from being a shepherd to becoming one of the Four Heroes of Erdas. “What would I have to do?” Worthy asked.

“Find the kids,” Stead answered. “They probably think they’ve escaped, and they’re wrong about that. They need to know that the Oathbound are rounding up all the Greencloaks in the world. Tell them what you know about the gifts. Help them.”

“I don’t know anything about any gifts,” Worthy said blankly.

“Yumaris says otherwise,” Stead said. “But you’re right, nobody knows much about them. The ancient Greencloaks had a nasty habit of wiping out any information they thought was too dangerous. The gifts have apparently been lost for many years. But it’s time they were found.” He pointed at Yumaris. “She had a vision of you and the gifts, and now she will tell you about them.”

Worthy groaned. “She’ll tell me all about the consistency of dirt particles, is what.” He glared at Yumaris.

She grinned up at him. “Gifts!” she said happily. “Rock and claw! Circle! And that other thingie!”

“*Thingie*,” Worthy muttered. “So helpful. Thank you *so* much.” Then he shrugged. He was a Redcloak, and Stead was his leader, *and* maybe

this was his chance to finally prove that he was *worthy* in more than just name.

And ... *claw*. Hmm. He just might know something about that. “All right,” Worthy agreed, nodding at Stead. “I’ll do it. What will you be doing in the meantime?”

“The Oathbound serve the leaders of Erdas,” Stead answered. “Their intentions are honorable, but they’re wrong about the Greencloaks. They’re being manipulated by someone else. Just in case, we’re going to need a larger force. I’ll be gathering the rest of the Redcloaks, so we’re ready to protect the Greencloaks if we have to.”

Worthy had to admit that it sounded like a good plan. “Fine.” He sighed. “I’ll go find the Four Heroes. And whether they trust me or not, I’ll make sure they’re not captured. And I’ll help them with the rock, the claw, the circle, and ... ” He glared at Yumaris. “With the *other thingie*.”



11

NIGHTMARES

“I FEEL CLOSER TO YOU ALL THAN I’VE EVER FELT BEFORE,” Rollan said in a muffled voice.

“Rollan, your elbow is in my face,” Abeke complained.

“I would say that I’m sorry,” he answered, “except that your knee is up my nose.”

“Stop wiggling,” Anka grumbled. “It’s just making it worse.”

All five of the Greencloaks lay in a heap on the pine-needled ground. They were wrapped tightly together in the sticky spiderweb.

Most of the Oathbound had gone to fetch a wagon to transport the captured Greencloaks back to the Citadel, leaving the Marked man with the spider spirit animal and one other Oathbound on guard.

“Conor,” Meilin whispered. “See if you can reach the knife on Rollan’s belt.”

“All right,” he whispered back, and groped with his hand. He felt the grip of the knife with the tips of his fingers, but he was too entangled in web to reach it. Anyway, one knife would not be enough to cut them free of the web.

There was only one way out of this. From where Conor lay, tightly bound up with the others, he could see both of the Oathbound a few paces away, leaning against a tree.

“Listen,” Conor whispered. The three other kids and Anka fell silent. “We have to escape now, before Wikam the Just—”

“The *Unjust*,” Rollan interrupted.

“Right, Wikam the *Unjust*,” Conor went on. “We have to escape before he gets back with the wagon. On the count of three, we’ll all call our spirit animals at the same time and break out of this web.”

“One,” Meilin whispered.

“Two,” Abeke added.

“*Three*,” Rollan shouted.

Jhi burst from the passive state, tearing through the web that wrapped Meilin like it was tissue paper.

At the same moment, Uraza leaped forth, and her sharp claws shredded the web entangling Abeke.

And Briggan snarled, ripping the web away from Conor, who rolled free and jumped to his feet, pulling out his ax, ready to fight.

The Oathbound guards shouted; one of them drew her sword and the other snatched the spider from his shoulder and threw it at them. Sticky threads unfurled behind it, settling over Rollan, who was trying to struggle out of the net that had covered them before. Essix was still tangled, no help to him. Anka was fighting the web that covered her and her chameleon, too.

Drawing her sword, Meilin charged to meet the Oathbound guard, blocking her attack. Reversing the sword, Meilin struck with the pommel, knocking the guard unconscious; then she whirled and knelt beside Rollan, pulling the layers of web away from him. As they dried, the spider threads had become less sticky, but the kids all had rags of web clinging to them.

“Thank you, My Lady Panda,” Rollan gasped as he finally broke free, still cradling Essix in his arms.

Abeke nocked her one remaining arrow and trained it on the Marked Oathbound, who stood with his hands raised in surrender. His spider had retreated into a pocket on the front of his uniform; Conor could see a brown, furry leg peeking out.

“Ugh, spiders,” Rollan said, trying to free Essix’s wing from the sticky threads without damaging her feathers. “One crawled right across my face.” He shuddered.

“Just think of them as mice,” Meilin advised him.

“Mice? Seriously?” Rollan shot back.

She gave him a smug nod. “That’s what I do.”

“I don’t want a mouse walking over my face, either,” Rollan muttered. In his arms, Essix shrieked out a protest at being trapped. “All right, I’ll get you untangled,” Rollan said to her. “Just hold still.”

Finally, Anka freed herself from the last of the web. She had turned silvery white, like the strands that had covered her. “The rest of the Oathbound will be back soon,” she said sharply as her skin, hair, and clothes darkened to match the color of the forest. “Let’s get out of here.”

They ran.



Conor had thought before that he was too tired go any farther. But as the sun came up, he found himself with the others, stumbling to a halt at the edge of a port town.

During the night they’d outdistanced their pursuers. Once they found a ship and left Eura and the Oathbound behind, they could begin their quest to find all four of the gifts. And he would be free to sleep.

Without nightmares, he hoped.

With Anka keeping them unnoticed, they slipped into the town, heading for the docks. There, Anka booked them passage on a ship bound for Amaya, paying the captain extra to finish loading their goods quickly, so they could catch the next tide. She hustled the kids onboard. They only had enough money for one cabin with two hammocks in it, so they would have to take turns sleeping.

They stood now, checking out their cabin. “The hammocks sort of remind me of spiderwebs,” Rollan observed. “Creepy. I’m never going to fall asleep wrapped up in one of those things.”

“Some of us aren’t afraid of spiders,” Meilin told him.

“Uh-huh,” Rollan said skeptically.

As they took off their boots and weapons, he ran his fingers up the back of Meilin’s neck. “Spider!” he warned.

She flinched and swatted, then turned red as she realized that she’d betrayed her fear.

“Mouse, I mean,” Rollan teased.

Meilin folded her arms and glared at him.

“A cute, little, fluffy, brown mouse,” Rollan went on, grinning, and Meilin gave in, laughing.

“You sleep first,” Abeke said to Conor. She’d been keeping an eye on him, ever since their conversation in the Citadel. He remembered what she had said—that he was her truest friend. And what Olvan had warned as the stone viper venom had taken him—*stay true to each other*. Conor was determined to be as true and worthy a friend to Abeke as she was to him.

With a nod of thanks, Conor climbed wearily into the hammock, which swung to the side as the ship turned into the wind, heading out to sea. The one porthole in their cabin showed the afternoon sun glinting on the surface of the water and the port town receding into the distance. They were safely away. The Oathbound would never catch them now. They’d have to go back to the Citadel and guard the leaders of Erdas, as was their duty.

Rollan had climbed into the other hammock. He’d spent the night running while trying to free Essix’s feathers from the sticky spiderweb. Finally the falcon had stopped struggling and had gone into passive state, but Conor knew his friend was almost as tired as he was.

Uraza, who hated being at sea, was in passive state, and so was Briggan. Jhi had settled in a corner, filling a quarter of the cabin’s space with her calm, healing presence. Meilin and Abeke sat on the deck, leaning back against the panda.

Anka was nowhere to be seen, but unless she moved, Conor tended to lose track of her. He figured she was in the cabin somewhere.

His hammock swung gently back and forth as the ship cut through the waves. Sleepily, Conor listened to Meilin and Abeke’s quiet conversation as they shared out a meal of ship’s biscuit and dried apples.

From the other hammock came the faint sound of Rollan, sound asleep, snoring.

“Rollan probably never had a bad dream in his life,” Meilin said. Conor could hear the smile in her voice as she spoke about him.

“I bet he dreams about Tarik,” he heard Abeke say.

“Yes, you’re probably right,” Meilin agreed.

There was a silent moment. “I have nightmares, too, once in a while,” Abeke said softly.

“About what?” Meilin mumbled through a bite of biscuit.

Abeke’s voice sounded sad. “Losing Uraza. And that moment when she attacked me. I was so afraid. Of her. If Shane hadn’t stepped in, Uraza would have killed me.”

“You’re not afraid anymore, are you?” Meilin asked.

“No,” Abeke said. “But I still think about it.” Conor knew how hard it was for Abeke to be having this conversation without the comfort of Uraza’s presence. But the big cat hated water; she was better off in passive state.

Meilin was quiet for a minute. “I know what it’s like to doubt your bond with your spirit animal. You just have to trust.”

“I do. I trust Uraza completely,” Abeke said. There was a rustling sound. “I have a comb. Do you want me to unbraid your hair for you?”

As Meilin answered, Conor felt himself drift into sleep.

Where the Wyrms was waiting for him.

At first he was floating in a soft darkness, gently rocked by unseen waves. Then he looked down at himself. He was standing. At his feet, the darkness was moving. It was not soft or peaceful, he realized, and dread prickled over his skin. It was a seething mass of oily, black parasites. As he watched in horror, they flowed up, over his legs, their touch icy cold, until they covered his entire body. Then they pushed through his skin until he wasn’t a boy anymore, just a boy-shaped collection of black, pulsing worms, with a piercing pain in his forehead where he’d worn the Wyrms’ spiral mark. He opened his mouth to scream, and writhing black worms flowed out of him.

As his shout echoed in the tiny ship cabin, he jerked awake, then struggled out of the hammock, landing with a thump on the deck. He crouched there, shivering, still feeling the cold touch of the parasites.

The red light of sunset streamed through the porthole, turning everything in the cabin the color of blood.

And then Abeke was crouched at his side, taking his hand. “It’s all right,” she assured him.

“What’s going on?” came Rollan’s sleepy voice from the other hammock.

“Nothing,” Meilin answered. Her hair was unbraided, a long, straight curtain of black silk that hung down her back. “Go back to sleep.”

Conor kept shivering, still seeing the parasites. He reached up to rub his forehead, which ached.

“Look at me,” Abeke said firmly, taking his chin in her hand. “You’re all right.” To his astonishment, she pushed his hand aside, leaned closer, and put her lips to the very spot where the Wyrms had marked him. After the kiss, she leaned back, and he stared into her wise, brown eyes.

“Let Jhi help,” Meilin said, and moved aside so the big panda could come closer.

Jhi put a big paw on Conor’s shoulder, and he felt the wet rasp of her tongue as it stroked over his brow, over the mark, over the place where Abeke had kissed him.

The constant pain of his forehead faded. The creeping dread of the Wyrms lifted.

A feeling of peace and healing spread through him.

Abeke nodded. “You’re all right,” she repeated.

“I’m all right,” Conor agreed.

And suddenly, it was true. He let out a relieved breath. Even with everything that had happened, the terrible things he’d seen, the blood, the fighting, he wouldn’t want to go back to being a simple shepherd. He was with his friends. He was where he belonged.

It had taken a long time. But thanks to his friends, he was finally, truly, free of the Wyrms.



“WE’RE BEING WATCHED,” ABEKE SAID, STOPPING IN THE middle of the road. She’d been feeling prickly for the past hour, and she was a hunter—she knew when to listen to her instincts. At her side, Uraza crouched, her long tail twitching.

“But we left the Oathbound behind in Eura,” Conor responded.

“Maybe we did,” Abeke said, looking around alertly. “But we’re still being watched. Followed. Stalked, maybe.”

On reaching Amaya they had left the ship, and now they had almost reached Concorba. The dirt path they were on ran straight toward the city, through a forest crowded with trees that Abeke didn’t know the names of, their leaves turning autumn colors—bright yellow, brown, flaming orange.

And ... red. She caught a glimpse of something red disappearing behind a nearby tree. But it wasn’t a leaf.

“I was right,” Abeke whispered. “There’s someone here.”

“Should I hide us?” Anka asked. She hadn’t taken on the colors of the forest, but her features seemed blurred. Somehow it was hard to get a really good look at her.

“No,” Meilin decided. She put her hand on the pommel of her sword. She raised her voice. “Whoever is following us should show himself.”

The only move from the forest was the rustling of leaves in a cool breeze.

At Abeke's side, Uraza's keen, violet eyes gleamed. Briggan stood beside Conor, his ears pricked, his big nose sniffing. Jhi was in passive state, and Essix floated high above the forest on a current of warm air.

"Behind that tree over there," Rollan said, pointing to where Abeke had glimpsed the bit of red.

Abeke grinned suddenly, feeling the thrill of the hunt. "Go get him, Uraza." At her words, the big leopard sprang forward. She leaped once, bounded around a tree, and pounced. There was a yell and a scuffle of leaves. The kids and Briggan raced after her.

As they came around the tree, they found a boy in a white mask and red cloak sprawled on the ground with Uraza's front paws on his chest. Uraza flexed her claws, and the boy yowled and squirmed, but she didn't let him up.

Red cloak. Cat mask.

"Worthy," Meilin said, sounding disgusted.

"Unworthy is more like it," Rollan put in.

"What are you doing sneaking around here?" Meilin demanded.

"I wasn't sneaking," Worthy protested.

"Following, then," Abeke said. "Stalking. Watching."

"All right," Worthy said, giving up. "Get this overgrown house cat off me, and I'll tell you."



It was a good time to stop to eat lunch, so the four kids pulled bread and cheese out of their one pack and sat on the leafy ground. They introduced Worthy to Anka, who nodded and then did her usual fade-into-the-background thing. Abeke, with her honed hunter skills, knew where Anka was, but all she could see, even looking straight at her, was a faint outline against the trunk of a tree. She wondered if Anka's skin only looked like tree bark, or if it had taken on that nubbled, rough texture, too.

"All right, *Unworthy*," Meilin said, pointing at him with the knife she was using to cut a piece of cheese. "Talk."

Abeke saw the Redcloak's strange slitted eyes blink behind his mask. "Our leader, Stead, sent me to warn you."

“Uh-huh,” Rollan said skeptically. “Warn us about what?”

“The Greencloaks are officially being broken up.” Ignoring their gasps, he went on. “The leaders of Erdas have ordered the Oathbound to arrest every Greencloak in the world,” Worthy answered. “You are *all* to be put on trial for what happened at the Citadel.”

“But we had nothing to do with the attack,” Meilin protested.

“I know that,” Worthy said. “All the Redcloaks know it. But to the rest of the world, you are renegades. You’re to be arrested on sight. The Oathbound know you are here. They’re tracking you. Stead sent me to warn you—and to help you.”

The four Greencloaks looked at each other in dismayed silence. They had thought they’d escaped, but they were in much greater danger than they’d realized.

“Maybe we should abandon our quest for the four gifts,” Meilin said slowly. “What Worthy is talking about—the suspicion, the arrests, the trial. It means the true end of the Greencloaks. Maybe we should try to figure out who is behind it all.”

Abeke saw the logic of this. She saw Rollan and Conor considering it, too.

“No,” came a voice from the edge of their clearing. Slowly Anka’s form took shape as she stepped away from the tree where she’d been sitting. “The quest for the four gifts is far more important than you realize. You *must* find them. And isn’t it the task that Olvan assigned you?”

“That’s true,” Meilin said. “It is. But still, I think—”

“Consider this,” Anka said, stepping forward. Somehow her face was still in shadow, blurred, so Abeke couldn’t get a good look at it. “The two tasks are connected. The gifts, once you’ve found them all, can be used to remind the leaders that the Greencloaks have always served the four lands of Erdas.”

Abeke saw her point. “I think Anka’s right, and we should continue,” she said. “We should do as Olvan ordered. We should go on with the quest for the four gifts.” She looked around the circle of her friends, and they all nodded agreement.

“I can help with that,” Worthy said. “I know about your quest. I can help you find the rock, the claw, the circle, and the ... uh ... the other thing. And I can help you escape the Oathbound.”

“Are you saying you want to join us?” Rollan asked skeptically.

“No way,” Conor interrupted. “Have you forgotten who he really is? Devin Trunswick. He’s a bully, and a liar, and he betrayed all of Trunswick when he joined Zerif.”

“I was having a bad day,” Worthy mumbled.

“He drank the Bile,” Conor went on.

“I drank the Bile, too,” Meilin reminded him.

“Not on purpose,” Conor countered. “Not like he did. Who knows what else he’s capable of? We can’t let him join us.”

As Rollan was nodding agreement, Abeke was shaking her head, setting her braids swinging. This kind of anger—it wasn’t like Conor. She knew he didn’t like Worthy; Devin Trunswick had treated him badly when he’d been the older boy’s servant. Clearly the usually very forgiving Conor had not forgiven him yet.

She tried to reason with him. “But Worthy fought the Wurm, just as we did,” she said. And she couldn’t forget that he was a Redcloak—just like Shane. No matter what else he had done, Shane had died a hero’s death.

“And he seems to know more about the gifts than we do,” Meilin put in.

“Not much more,” Abeke noted, wondering where Worthy had gotten his information about the *rock, claw, circle, and other thing*.

“I really do want to help,” Worthy said, sounding intentionally pitiful, Abeke thought.

The four Greencloaks exchanged a look. Rollan raised his eyebrows. Then Meilin nodded, and so did Abeke. Conor shot Worthy a look of deep dislike, and then he shrugged. “Maybe,” he said reluctantly.

“We can give him a trial period,” Meilin said, with a nod. “If he really is helpful, he can stay; if he’s not, he’ll have to leave. Agreed?”

All the kids nodded, and Worthy sighed loudly, as if they were being stupid for not accepting him immediately.

Abeke vowed to keep an eye on him, just in case. She accepted a piece of cheese on stale bread that Meilin handed her, sharing pieces with Uraza, who snapped them up and made a contented rumbling sound in her chest.

Abeke chewed a bite of bread, thinking. “You said the Oathbound are tracking us?” she asked Worthy.

He was looking longingly at the bread. He nodded, then pointed with his chin in the direction of Concorba. “They’re probably lying in wait for you. They’re not sure where you’re going, but they expect you to pass through the city. That’s where they’ll capture you.”

“We have to go into Concorba for supplies,” Anka said, from just outside their circle.

As she spoke, Worthy jerked in surprise. “Yipes! I forgot you were there.”

“Happens a lot,” Anka said acidly. And, Abeke thought, a little sadly.

“Anka is right,” Meilin said, holding up the heel of the loaf of bread and a rind of cheese. “This is the last of our food.” After hesitating, she held it out to Worthy, who seized it and started eating, tearing off pieces and stuffing them under the mask, into his mouth.

Abeke stared at Anka, who was fading back into the color of the tree she was leaning against.

The Oathbound were tracking them. She realized that she needed to stop thinking like a hunter, and start thinking like the hunter’s prey. It meant becoming more like Anka—passing through the land unnoticed.

“The Oathbound are hunting Greencloaks,” Abeke said slowly.

“That’s what he said,” Rollan mumbled through a bite of bread, nodding at Worthy.

“Meilin, take out the gift,” Abeke ordered. When her friend had taken out the rock and unwrapped it, Abeke pointed to it. “The rock is hidden. Unrevealed, as Olvan said. We have to be the same way. As the Heroes of Erdas, we’re too easy to track. We have to go in disguise. We can’t be Greencloaks anymore.”



AMBUSH

ROLLAN GULPED DOWN HIS BITE OF BREAD AND CHEESE and jumped up. “No,” he said forcefully. “Greencloaks are who we *are*. We can’t take off our cloaks.”

They all got to their feet, staring at him.

Rollan felt a red flush creeping up his face. “I know, I know. I was the last of the four of us to become a Greencloak. But look”—he pointed in the direction of Concorba—“I spent a lot of time hiding in that city, trying not to get caught by the militia. I didn’t like sneaking around then, and I don’t like the thought of it now. And remember what Tarik told us? He said we should never take off our cloaks. He said, *We must stand behind who we are and what we represent*. Remember? We should keep wearing our cloaks, and just be more careful.”

“What’s the problem, Rollan?” Worthy put in with a shrug. “Your cloak is basically rags. You should throw it away anyway, and get a new one when this is all over.”

Worthy’s comment hit Rollan like a punch in the stomach.

“Shut up, Unworthy,” Conor said, glaring. At his side, Briggan growled, sensing the sudden tension in the air.

“What?” Worthy said, raising his hands as if surrendering. “What did I say?”

“This,” Rollan said in a shaking voice, holding up the ragged edge of Tarik’s cloak, “was given to me by a man who was braver and more

worthy than you will ever be.”

Worthy’s face was hidden behind his mask, so it was hard to see how he was really feeling. But he took a step back and lowered his head.

Rollan clenched his fists. He wasn’t particularly good at fighting. He usually managed to talk himself out of tricky situations. But if Worthy so much as opened his mouth, Rollan was going to punch him. Surprisingly, the Redcloak stayed quiet.

It was Meilin who spoke. “Rollan,” she said softly, “I know you don’t want to set Tarik’s cloak aside. But Abeke is right. We take too great a risk being Greencloaks at a time when the Oathbound are hunting us.”

“If they really *are* hunting us,” Rollan shot back. He pointed at Worthy. “We only have his word for it that they are.”

“We can’t take the chance,” Abeke said. “And remember, we *have* taken our cloaks off before.”

Rollan remembered. He, Conor, and Abeke, along with Finn and the other Greencloaks, had been in Stetriol on what they had thought would be a suicide mission. It had been a matter of life and death. This situation wasn’t so dire.

“We don’t have any choice,” Meilin said. Giving Rollan a sympathetic look, she unpinned her cloak and rolled it into a lump. “It’s not safe to carry them with us,” she continued. “If we really are fugitives, there’s going to be a bounty for our capture. People will be watchful. We might even have our packs searched. We can’t hold on to any liabilities.”

Then she stepped to the edge of clearing and dug a small hole with her sword. She kneeled there, tucking the bundle reverently into the earth. Abeke, Conor, and Anka followed one by one, each relinquishing their cloaks to the soil.

Maybe they were right. Slowly Rollan took off his tattered cloak. As he folded it carefully, Essix dove toward their clearing. She banked, circling him once and brushing his face with a wing tip, then settled onto his shoulder, a heavy weight. His cloak had a patch of leather sewn onto the shoulder so she wouldn’t shred it when she perched there. Without it, her sharp talons pierced his shirt, like needles poking into his skin. She was not a comfortable passenger.

The falcon was not usually affectionate, but she bent her sleek head and ran the curve of her beak along the edge of his ear, comforting him. He reached up and stroked the dappled feathers on her chest, feeling better. Then he felt worse, realizing that if they were in disguise, their spirit animals would have to be hidden, too. He didn't look forward to convincing Essix to go into passive state again.



They decided that because Rollan knew Concorba best, he and Conor would go into the city to buy supplies. Meilin and Abeke would wait in the woods nearby, hidden by Anka, until they got back.

When Worthy insisted that he should go, too, Rollan and Conor ignored him.

“No, really,” Worthy said. “I can carry the supplies.” When they didn't answer, he slumped, as if disappointed. “I just want to help, that's all.”

Rollan heard Conor mutter something about *Unworthy*. It was a good name for the Redcloak. More appropriate than the one he had chosen, anyway.

Anka gave them a few coins, and Conor slung the pack for groceries over his shoulder. To Rollan's surprise, Essix went meekly into passive state; Conor had rolled down his shirtsleeves to cover the tattoo of Briggan on his arm. They set off toward Concorba, leaving their weapons behind, taking only the small knife that Rollan kept hidden in his boot. Being without his cloak made Rollan feel strangely defenseless, as if it were more than just cloth. As if it were a shield. To anyone seeing them, Rollan and Conor looked like two ordinary boys; specifically, Rollan looked like a rather scruffy kid from Concorba, and Conor looked like a slightly better-dressed Euran visitor.

They entered the city, keeping an eye out for the distinctive black uniforms of the Oathbound. They walked slowly, trying not to call attention to themselves. Rollan sniffed the air, smelling the familiar scents of roasted corn, pine smoke, horse dung, and drying chilies.

He glanced aside at his friend. When they'd first met up again on their journey to the Citadel, Conor had looked pale and unhappy, and though

he wasn't the chattiest of kids, he'd been even quieter than usual. Rollan's ability to read people's moods had shown him how dark the other boy's thoughts had been. But Conor looked better now. "You having those dreams still?" Rollan asked.

Conor looked startled. "The Wyrms? No." He frowned down at his feet, thinking. "But last night I had another dream. About a wave."

Rollan flapped a hand at him. "That kind of wave?"

Conor laughed. "No, the watery kind."

"A prophetic dream?" Rollan asked.

"I'm not sure." Conor shrugged. "I'll let you know."

They kept to the side of the road, on a boarded sidewalk, until they came to the store that Rollan knew belonged to Monte, a Greencloak they'd met when they had come to Amaya in search of Arax the Ram. Monte and his partner, Barlow, had run a trading post in Boulder City, a remote village. Barlow had been killed in a fight against the Conquerors, who had tried to take the Granite Ram talisman. Later in the war, Monte had fought with the Greencloaks against the Conquerors in Stetriol. When that battle had ended in victory, the man had returned to Amaya to set up a new store in Concorba.

Rollan had been looking forward to seeing bald, cheerful Monte, still telling jokes and selling supplies to travelers, but the front door of the store was locked, the windows shuttered.

"Won't find him here," a dry voice said.

Rollan and Conor turned to see an old man dressed all in brown rags sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, his bare feet in the dust of the road.

"Where is he?" Rollan asked.

"Well, now, let me think. Hmm." The old man held out a filthy hand, asking to be paid for the information.

With a sigh, Conor dug out some money—too much, Rollan noted—and gave it to him.

The old man eyed the coin. "Huh." He fixed the two boys with a bloodshot eye. "Monte's a friend of yours?"

"None of your business," Rollan said, before Conor could say anything. He knew his friend wasn't used to dealing with this kind of thing. "Where is he? Why is his shop closed up?"

The old man pursed his lips. “No need to get snippy, boy.” Then he shrugged. “Some guard types came. Arrested Monte, took him away. A couple days ago, that was.”

“Guard types,” Conor repeated. “Dressed in black? Wearing brass collars?”

“Yep.” The old man nodded enthusiastically. “Said they had orders from the Prime Minister of Amaya to arrest every Greencloak they could find. Would seem Monte is in big trouble.” His rheumy eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t know nothing about Greencloaks, would you? There’s a sweet reward out for information about them.”

“No,” Conor said hastily. “We don’t know anything about Greencloaks. We’ve, uh, never even met a Greencloak.” He gulped. “I’m not even sure we know what—”

“All right, thanks,” Rollan interrupted quickly, seizing Conor’s arm and pulling him toward the street before he could completely give them away. “Less is more, Conor,” Rollan said as they hurried across the road. When Conor gave him a blank look, Rollan explained. “If you’re lying, don’t explain too much. It’ll give you away every time.”

“I know,” Conor said, looking chagrined. “It just felt like he knew what we are. Do you think he suspected us?”

“Probably.” Rollan looked back over his shoulder. There was no one sitting in front of Monte’s store. Uh-oh. The old man *had* been suspicious, which meant he’d scurried away to tell somebody about the two boys asking after a Greencloak friend of theirs. It wouldn’t take long before that information reached the Oathbound.

They had to hurry.

And Rollan had to admit that his friends—and Worthy—had been right. If they’d been wearing their cloaks, they would have been arrested already.

Moving fast, they found another store that sold supplies for traveling. The storekeeper seemed very curious, asking them where they were headed. When Conor started to answer truthfully, Rollan elbowed him in the side to silence him. He lied, saying they were heading for the coast to go fishing.

They came out of the store loaded with supplies—a full pack slung over each shoulder and their arms full. Staggering, they headed for the poorer section of the city. Dust swirled around their feet as they made their way down a narrow street, where the houses were little more than huts, and skinny dogs growled at them before skittering away.

Seeing a few familiar faces, Rollan nodded, returning their greetings. He'd grown up here, after all. People were bound to recognize him as one of the Heroes of Erdas. "This is not good," he said to Conor through clenched teeth. "A lot of these people know that I'm a Greencloak."

"Maybe we should get out of the city," Conor said worriedly.

"One more stop," Rollan said. "It won't take long."

"Where are we going?" Conor asked.

"Just down this street." A few months ago he'd gotten a letter from his mother describing what she'd been doing ever since the end of the Second Devourer War. "My mother opened a school. It should be just around this corner."

Conor blinked. He'd met Aidana, so Rollan knew how surprising this information was. "A school?"

"Yeah." Rollan took a few more steps, and then he stopped. "Look, you know that I was a street kid here for a long time. When my mom abandoned me, she did it because she couldn't take care of me. She had the bond sickness. She thought I'd be better off without her."

Conor nodded solemnly.

It was hard to talk about this stuff, but Rollan made himself go on. "I know she felt guilty about it for a long time." He pointed down the street toward a big building made of hard-packed adobe bricks. "She didn't get the chance to help me, so now she's trying to help other street kids. She opened up this free school." He shrugged. "Maybe they'll have some useful information."

"And you get a chance to see her," Conor said.

"Yeah, that too," Rollan admitted.

They dumped the heavy bags of supplies on a porch in front of the school. Just before they stepped inside, Rollan paused. "Go ahead. I just have to do something."

Conor nodded and went inside.

Quickly, Rollan dug into a small satchel at his side and pulled out his cloak. It had been less ragged and faded many months ago, when he and Tarik had been trapped by the Conquerors and only Rollan had been able to escape through a space too small for Tarik to fit into. As Tarik sent Rollan to safety, he'd smiled when his own green cloak settled over the boy. Shortly after Tarik's sacrifice, Rollan had taken his vows and had become a true Greencloak, united in purpose with his friends for the first time.

Rollan would never forget the pain of saying good-bye to the man who had become like a father to him. Even if he and his friends had to sneak around, he wouldn't leave Tarik's cloak behind. He stuffed it deep into the bottom of one of the sacks full of supplies. Then he followed Conor into the school.

As he stepped from the bright, sunny outdoors into the dimness of the schoolroom, all the students in the class stared at him. They sat on rows of benches, separated by a center aisle. Each kid held a notebook and pencil. Conor was already sitting down on one of the benches, as if he was one of the students.

And then Rollan saw his mother. She was standing at the front of the room, facing a wall painted black, writing some numbers with a piece of chalk. Her hair was a long black braid hanging straight down her back.

His mother, teaching math. He'd seen some strange things in his life, but this was possibly the strangest.

"*Pssst,*" whispered a nearby kid. She poked his leg with a sharp finger. She was Niloan and had intricately braided hair and wore a sand-colored robe. "You better sit down, or you're going to be in trouble." She scooted over, giving Rollan room to sit on the bench beside her. "I'm Ngozi," she added.

"Your teacher's pretty tough?" Rollan whispered to Ngozi.

As she nodded, another girl, Amayan by the looks of her, leaned in and gave them both a stern look. "Our teacher," she said sharply, "is *wonderful.*"

"Why's that?" Rollan asked, trying not to smile.

"I love, love, love math," she answered. "And Miss Aidana is a very good math teacher." This girl wore neat, colorful clothes and had long

black hair, which, probably not by coincidence, she'd braided in the same style as his mother.

Ngozi rolled her eyes. "That's Sora."

"How did you find her school?" Rollan whispered.

"She found us," Ngozi began, "because we're—"

"*Shhhhhh*," Sora hissed, glaring. "We're not supposed to talk about that with"—she shot a knifelike glance at Rollan—"with *strangers*."

Rollan grinned, then saw his mother turn away from the blackboard, saying something about the math lesson. Her eyes rested on him and she froze. The chalk fell from her fingers.

"Ohhhh, you're in for it," Ngozi whispered.

Rollan's grin widened. "You have no idea," he whispered back.

"We've been studying numbers," his mother said loudly. "Specifically the number *one*."

"Here it comes," he said to Ngozi and Sora, and got to his feet.

His mother had her hands on her hips. "The number one," she repeated. "Which is how many letters my son has sent to me in the last three months."

All the kids were staring at him, wide-eyed.

Rollan couldn't stop smiling. "We were traveling," he told his mom.

She mock-glared at him. "No excuse." She opened her arms, and he went down the central aisle to the front of the room, where she pulled him into a hug. Then she set him back and looked him over, a hand on his shoulder. With the tip of a finger, she traced the scar on his face that he'd gotten during the battle against the Wurm. "You've grown taller," she said softly.

She had a few more lines at the corners of her eyes. And she was even more beautiful than he remembered.

She cocked her head. "You said you were traveling." A smile hovered at the corner of her mouth. "With that darling girl, Meilin?"

Rollan felt a blush prickling on his face. "Mo-om!" he protested.

"Miss Aidana," shouted a tall, red-haired boy from the back of the room, interrupting them.

"Yes, Jean-Luc," his mother said, without looking away from Rollan's face.

“There’s a bunch of people wearing black clothes outside,” the boy said. “They have swords. And shiny collars.”

Conor stood up from the bench where he’d been sitting. His eyes met Rollan’s.

“Oathbound!” they said at the same time.

“You’re in trouble?” Rollan’s mother asked. Then she waved her hand. “Never mind. Of course you’re in trouble. Need to escape?” At Rollan’s nod, she pointed toward a door that opened from the back of the schoolroom. “Quick. This way.”

Conor raced down the center aisle; Rollan met him at the door, which his mother flung open. It opened onto an alley. A figure dressed in black was coming from the right.

Rollan paused to give his mother a quick hug good-bye.

“Write to me,” she said sternly, and pointed left. “That way. Run!”

Rollan and Conor went left, and the Oathbound came after them. They raced down the alley, bursting out into the area in front of the school with their pursuer on their heels.

Five more Oathbound were there, weapons drawn.

Frantically, Rollan glanced over his shoulder. The one from the alley was closing in from behind.

They were surrounded!



HERO

WORTHY GROANED.

Rollan and Conor. Greencloaks. Stupid. *So* stupid.

Of *course* the Oathbound knew about Rollan's mother's school. Even though Aidana wasn't a Greencloak, it was well known that her son was. But the two idiots, loaded with supplies, had walked right up to her front door in broad daylight.

At least Worthy'd had time to get the supplies hidden in a nearby alley before the Oathbound had shown up.

Worthy had been following Rollan and Conor since they'd entered the city, hardly noticing the odd looks from passersby. Ever since he'd taken up the mask of a Redcloak, ever since he'd woken up one morning unable to summon his spirit animal, Elda, he'd gotten used to stares. And then his eyes had changed, and his hands ached as retractable claws replaced his fingernails, and he grew sleepless with the prowling intensity of the big cat. His hair had turned sleek and dark ...

... and really, nobody needed to know about the tail.

Now was his chance to prove to Conor and the others that he *was* worthy enough to join them. If only he hadn't made the stupid mistake about Rollan's cloak. Abeke had explained where he'd gone wrong, how Rollan had been a street kid who'd come to see Tarik as a kind of father—and how Tarik had been killed right in front of Rollan, leaving the boy holding his green cloak.

So yeah, he could see why it was important.

He'd make up for his mistake. He'd get them all to trust him.

At least Abeke was talking to him. She was a hunter, but she was wise and kind, too. Meeting her now as an ally, Worthy could see why Shane had been in love with her. Whether he'd admitted it to himself or not.

The beautiful, terrifying Meilin, though. He'd keep his distance from that one. She could probably take him apart with her little finger. Scary. Brrr.

He wasn't sure yet about the sharp, shy chameleon woman, Anka, though the Greencloaks seemed to trust her.

But for now, Worthy had to help the boys.

Crouching in an alley with the bags of supplies piled behind him, Worthy's panther-aided senses were on full alert. The six Oathbound rushed into the area in front of the school. Their leader gestured, and one of them broke off, circling around the back of the building.

An ambush.

Worthy heard a shout, and then Rollan and Conor raced around the corner of the school and stopped short, seeing the five Oathbound waiting for them; the sixth was coming from behind. Rollan pulled out what looked like a little knife from his boot. But it wouldn't be enough.

Good, Worthy thought.

The Oathbound closed in on the boys, brandishing their swords. Their leader, a tall, gaunt-faced man, was Marked. He had a huge black-feathered bird, a vulture maybe, riding on his shoulder.

Six adults, armed and well trained, versus two stupid kids who hadn't even called forth their spirit animals yet. Worthy waited another moment, just so they'd know how much danger they were in before he heroically rescued them. Before going, he checked that his long panther tail, which sometimes liked to wave free when he got into a fight, was hidden away. All set.

Just as the Marked Oathbound was about to grab Rollan, there was a flash of light, and Essix appeared in full flight, shrieking and slashing with her sharp talons at the face of the attacker, who fell back, wailing loudly. Essix arced higher to gain altitude for a strike against the vulture, which had launched itself awkwardly from its perch. Rollan leaned back

to let an Oathbound woman's blade pass him by, then ducked and used a low kick to sweep her legs out from under her.

A move he'd learned from the terrifying Meilin, no doubt.

The woman scrambled away from Rollan, then got to her feet and fled down the street.

At the same moment, Conor called forth Briggan, who leaped from his arm, teeth bared, and knocked an attacking Oathbound to the ground; a quick bite to the shoulder and the man was writhing in the dust, moaning. Meanwhile, Conor caught the knife Rollan had tossed to him. He ducked a sword thrust from another one of the Oathbound.

What had been two versus six was already two versus three, and Conor was attacking, using the speed and agility he gained by Briggan being in his active state.

Whoops, Worthy thought. Better get in there and be a hero quick, before the Greencloak boys rescued themselves.

Feeling ridiculously gleeful, Worthy burst from his hiding place. One pantherlike leap, and he was close enough to the fight to rake his retractable claws down the arm of an Oathbound. Then he spun into a jump that took him behind the man Rollan was fighting. With a growl, he aimed a blow at the man's head. The Oathbound swayed before falling to the ground, landing with a thud. The man Conor had been fighting was trembling on the ground, with Briggan's big paws on his chest, holding him down.

Worthy, Conor, and Rollan had a moment to stand looking at each other as the dust of the fight settled around them.

Overhead, Essix soared and let out a fierce cry.

"More Oathbound coming!" Rollan gasped, blinking, and Worthy knew he'd been looking through the falcon's eyes.

The three whirled to see nine more black-clad figures charging down the street, led by the one who had run away. *Uh-oh*, Worthy realized. She hadn't been fleeing—she'd been fetching reinforcements.

Three against ten was another story. No, make that twelve—two members of the original Oathbound ambush were climbing from the ground, picking up the swords they'd dropped.

Rollan and Conor took up defensive stances, back-to-back. “Stay with us!” Rollan shouted at Worthy, as if *they* were going to protect *him*!

Both of the boys were panting. Conor gripped the small knife, their only weapon. Essix had landed on Rollan’s shoulder; Worthy saw the boy flinch as she caught her balance, her talons clinging to him. Briggan crouched at Conor’s side, ready to attack.

Worthy formed up next to them. “What’s the plan?” he asked.

“Uh, don’t let them capture us?” Rollan said. He kept his eyes on the Oathbound, who were being ordered by the tall, thin Marked man with the vulture to split into groups. They’d attack from three sides.

“No plan,” Conor said quickly. “We can’t defeat that many. We’ll have to fight our way free and run.”

“Oathbound!” came the harsh call from the Marked leader. “Attack!” His vulture was perched on his shoulder. At his order, its ragged wings spread wide and it launched itself into the air, swooping closer as the black-clad soldiers drew their weapons—mostly swords, with just a few spears to keep things interesting.

Worthy extended his claws and crouched, ready to spring into action.

And then the Oathbound were on them.

Growling, Briggan leaped, tackling a soldier and sending his sword flying.

Overhead, the vulture, twice Essix’s size, battled the falcon; the two birds clashed and then tumbled to the ground, trailing feathers. The vulture had no vocal cords, so it had no call, but it made a guttural hissing sound as it tried slashing Essix with its hooked beak. Worthy heard the falcon shriek with fury and saw her hurl herself into the air again, pursued by the ponderously flapping vulture.

Worthy lithely avoided the thrust of a spear and then bonked the Oathbound holding it on the head; the woman collapsed almost gracefully onto the ground. Worthy then whirled in time to see Rollan fighting hand-to-hand with a man he must have disarmed; another Oathbound came at Rollan from the side, slashing the boy’s arm with her sword. As Rollan flinched, the man he was fighting struck him hard in the face.

Rollan fell heavily to the ground, then rolled away from the fighting, shaking his head as if he was stunned. Blood spurted from the sword cut on his arm. He gripped it with his other hand, but blood leaked out between his fingers. “I’m out,” he gasped, catching Worthy’s eye.

And suddenly it wasn’t about being a hero anymore.

Rollan was hurt.

Conor and Briggan were surrounded.

It was time to really fight.

Ripping off his mask, Worthy snarled out a challenge. For a moment, the Oathbound fell back before his rage—and at the sight of his slitted golden eyes and the claws that extended from the tips of his fingers. But at a shouted order from their leader, they seemed to take courage, gripping their weapons and surging back into an attack.

This is it, Worthy thought as he yowled and leaped to meet the onslaught. It didn’t matter how well he fought—they were too many. Rollan and Conor were the ones they wanted; if Worthy ran, they probably wouldn’t come after him. But he wasn’t going to abandon the Greencloaks. He would do whatever he could.

Just as the Oathbound began their charge, the double doors to the school burst open, and three of the students, with Aidana, rushed out.

All three of the students were Marked!

Aidana flung out her arm, and her spirit animal, a raven, flashed into the air. With a harsh cry he joined Essix in fighting the huge vulture. Aidana followed it into battle, going straight to crouch at her son’s side. Whipping off an embroidered scarf, she wrapped it around his arm to stop the bleeding.

Meanwhile, her three Marked students had joined the battle. They were surprisingly skilled, Worthy could see at once. As he fought off the Oathbound leader, an Amayan girl called forth a flamingo, which flapped awkwardly into the air, joining the aerial battle among Rollan’s falcon, his mother’s raven, and the huge vulture. At the same time, a tall Euran boy drew a longsword and joined the fray. His spirit animal, a stag the same red as his hair, leaped past him and slashed at an Oathbound soldier with antlers as sharp as knives.

The third student was a Niloan girl. With calm and precision, she drew a throwing knife from the sleeve of her sand-colored robe, took aim, and hurled it toward one of the attackers. At her feet bounded a little gray fox with huge ears. Worthy heard it make a yipping sound—it was picking out targets for the Niloan girl’s knives!

Clearly Rollan’s mother was teaching more than just reading and math in her school. One day her students might become powerful Greencloaks.

The battle swirled around Worthy, and he fought with all his panther-given speed and skill. Even with the help of Aidana and the three students, it was only enough to give Worthy, Rollan, and Conor an opening to escape.

At the mouth of the alley Worthy had been hiding in before, Briggan gave a sharp bark, summoning them. “We have to run!” Worthy shouted.

“Yes, go!” Aidana struck with her staff. “Jean-Luc,” she shouted at one of her students, “there’s one behind you!” She whirled and yelled, “We’ll hold them off. Run!”

Retreating, Rollan stumbled to the alley, Essix on his shoulder. A moment later, Conor joined him, calling for Briggan. Worthy snatched his mask from the dusty ground, then bounded into the alley, where he scooped up the bags of supplies. Handing one to Conor to carry, he followed as Briggan led them through a maze of winding alleys. The sounds of the battle in front of the school receded behind them.

“Left here,” Rollan gasped. “Then straight on.”

Oh, yeah, Worthy remembered. Rollan had grown up as a street kid in Concorba. He’d probably lived in these very alleys. A glance over his shoulder showed Worthy that Rollan had fallen a few steps behind. Sheathing his claws, he slowed and waited for him to catch up.

“We can rest a minute,” Worthy said, putting down his load of supplies. His tail had been trying to escape; he tucked it quickly away before the two Greencloaks could see it.

Rollan nodded and leaned against a brick wall, breathing hard. He had a growing bruise on one high cheekbone, where the Oathbound had punched him. The scarf his mother had wrapped around his arm was stained with blood.

Conor turned back and set the bag he was carrying on the ground. A nod to Briggan, and the wolf flashed into his dormant state. “Better not to be noticed now,” he said.

The three boys stood in the shadowy alley, catching their breaths. Worthy listened intently for sounds of pursuit but heard nothing. Just the everyday noises of a busy marketplace not far away, and a horse passing in a nearby street. “I think we’re clear,” he said quietly.

“For now,” Rollan said. “But they’ll be coming.”

Worthy nodded in agreement.

“That was good, remembering the supplies,” Conor said to him.

Worthy bent his head to tie on his mask, not wanting to reveal how pleased he was by Conor’s comment. Maybe the ice between them was beginning to thaw. With his toe he shoved one of the bags closer to Rollan. “I knew I had to get that one.” Mask in place, he looked up at the other boy but said nothing more.

He’d seen what Rollan had stored inside the bag.

Rollan just stared at him for a moment. Then he nodded. He glanced back the way they’d come. “I hope she’s all right.”

Ohhhhh. Worthy suddenly realized what he’d been unable to see before. Of *course* Rollan had known the Oathbound would be a danger, but he’d gone to see his mother anyway. He loved her. Just as he’d loved that Tarik guy.

Devin Trunswick had grown up with everything—family, a luxurious home, servants, and the knowledge that he would be an earl someday. And yet he’d still always hungered for more.

It was a hunger that had led him straight to the Conquerors.

When Devin eventually lost everything that he’d *thought* he wanted, he discovered what truly mattered to him. There was one person in his life who’d always love him, even when he made a mistake as big as joining an evil army. His brother, Dawson.

It was Dawson for whom Devin had finally decided to be Worthy.

Rollan, in contrast, had grown up with nothing, not even a family. The people he loved probably mattered more to him than anything.

Worthy swallowed. “I’m sorry about”—he flashed his eyes subtly toward the bag—“before.”

Rollan nodded. "It's all right," he said briefly. He studied Worthy for another moment. Then his mouth quirked into half a grin. "You yowled during the fight, didn't you?" he said.

Worthy blinked. Was Rollan teasing him? "I didn't *yowl*," he protested.

"Yes, you did," Conor put in seriously.

"See?" Rollan said, as if he was being completely reasonable. "You howled, Worthy. Like a cat with its tail being pulled."

"Yowled, you said, not howled. And I never yowl," Worthy corrected. "Or howl." He waited a beat. "Though I have been known to caterwaul now and then." Then he realized that Rollan, for the first time, had called him by his chosen name. And even Conor had joined in the joke.

As he returned Rollan's grin, he realized that maybe, finally, he had proved himself worthy of it.



“I NEED MORE ARROWS,” ABEKE SAID. AT HER SIDE, URAZA stood and stretched, then resettled in a patch of sunlight. Her violet eyes dropped shut as she dozed off again.

“We need more everything.” Meilin lifted her sword and inspected the blade, newly sharpened. Light glinted off the polished metal. Sheathing the weapon, she got to her feet. “Rollan and Conor should have been back with the supplies by now.” And Worthy. The Redcloak had spoken briefly with Abeke, and then he’d disappeared. Following the boys into Concorba, she assumed. *Helping*, he probably thought of it.

And speaking of disappearing ... Meilin glanced around the clearing they’d been waiting in.

There, a movement, and she caught a glimpse of Anka’s outline, blending into the rough brown bark of the tree she was leaning against.

So far, the Greencloak woman had been a valuable asset. But Meilin had long ago stopped thinking of people only as resources to be used. Maybe Anka could be a friend, too.

Meilin stretched, then ran through a few simple fighting forms, just to limber up. Then she paused. “Anka, would you like to spar with me?”

“No,” came the brusque answer. “I don’t fight. I hide.”

Nodding, Meilin stepped closer, then crouched near where she thought Anka was sitting. “Would you put your chameleon into passive state?” she asked. “I’d like to see what you really look like.”

There was a moment of silence. Meilin knew that Abeke was listening, too. “Nobody sees me as I am,” Anka finally said. The usual sharpness was missing from her voice.

“Sometimes,” Meilin said, “you don’t have to hide.”

“I would like to see you, too,” Abeke put in.

“All right,” the Greencloak woman said softly. There was a flash as the chameleon went into the dormant state.

Meilin saw Anka take shape before her. The woman sat very still—she must have trained herself to move as little as possible, in order to stay hidden. Revealed, Anka wore her green cloak. She sat cross-legged, her arms folded. The mark of her chameleon was wrapped around her wrist like a bracelet. Her hair was black and bristly, cut very short. Her eyes were dark brown, her face plain and ordinary, and ...

“You’re from Zhong!” Meilin exclaimed, delighted.

“You noticed,” Anka said dryly.

“I would have noticed before, if you’d let me,” Meilin said. And now she knew another reason why Anka didn’t know how to fight—in Zhong, girls weren’t supposed to study the martial arts. “Let me teach you a few forms, Anka,” she insisted, getting to her feet. “You never know when you might need to fight.” She took up a basic stance, standing very still; then she made a quick strike at the air and returned to her stance. “See? You could hit somebody out of nowhere. They’d never see you coming. Come and try it.”

“If you insist,” Anka said, standing up, but Meilin could see that she was interested.

They spent an hour this way: Meilin teaching, Anka awkward at first but learning quickly. Meilin was showing her where to strike an opponent’s neck to incapacitate him or her, when Uraza lifted her head and pricked her ears, alert. The tip of her spotted tail twitched.

Meilin heard it next—the sound of leaves crunching underfoot. Someone was coming, and not being too stealthy about it. Abeke got to her feet, raising her bow and nocking her single arrow.

Then Meilin relaxed. Coming through the trees were the three boys, carrying bags of supplies.

Her eyes went straight to Rollan. His face was bruised, and she saw with alarm that he was wearing a makeshift bandage. It was stained with blood.

“Can I get some panda spit here?” he asked, holding up his arm. He smiled to show her that he was essentially all right.

“Trouble?” Abeke asked.

Conor nodded and dropped the bags he’d been carrying onto the leafy ground. “Worthy was right—”

“You hear that?” Worthy interrupted, grinning. “Me. I was right.” He thumped himself proudly on the chest.

Conor stared at him for a long moment, then gave his head a rueful shake. “Anyway. The Oathbound were on the lookout for us. Wikam the Just was leading them.” Kneeling, Conor was unwrapping another bundle that he’d been carrying. He handed it to Abeke. “Arrows.”

“Ah, thank you!” Abeke said, seizing them and inspecting each arrow. She’d want to be sure they were made well and would fly straight.

Rollan settled on the ground and started trying to untie the bandage around his arm with one hand. “We had a little scuffle.”

“It was hardly little,” Worthy said. He’d taken up a position at the edge of the clearing, looking back in the direction they’d come. “We’ve only got a couple of minutes. The Oathbound will be on our tail soon. Our trail, I mean.”

Something had changed, Meilin realized. She knelt beside Rollan and carefully unwrapped the scarf from around his arm. The boys were treating Worthy as if he was ... well ... a friend. Even Conor was looking at him without frowning, and Meilin knew that Conor had very good reasons for hating Devin Trunswick. Clearly Worthy had proved himself in that little *scuffle* they’d had. It must have been quite a fight.

As Meilin took off Rollan’s bandage, she saw that he had a gash on his arm about as long as her hand. It wasn’t too deep, but it oozed blood, and she knew it had to hurt. With a quick gesture she summoned Jhi from passive state. The big panda yawned and rubbed at her eyes sleepily.

Rollan held up his arm. “Give me the spit, bear,” he said. Jhi sniffed at it, then licked it three times with her pink tongue.

Meilin saw Rollan relax. Yes, it had been painful. Now at least it wouldn't hurt as much, and there wouldn't be any danger of infection. Meilin didn't have time to stitch it up, but hopefully there was a field medical kit in the supplies and she could see to it properly later.

Suddenly Anka was at her shoulder. As soon as the boys had returned, she had called her chameleon spirit animal and faded once again into the background. "Conor said Wikam the Just was leading the Oathbound. We need to go."

From his lookout spot, Worthy nodded. "Yeah." He nodded at Rollan. "You all right?"

"Fine," Rollan said, and pulled his sleeve down over the scarf that Meilin had finished retying over his wound.

Conor and Abeke each picked up a bag of supplies. Meilin, Anka, Rollan, and Worthy did the same.

"Let's go," Anka said, and they headed out.



By traveling hard and sleeping light, and never kindling a campfire, they managed to remain ahead of the Oathbound scouts who hunted them.

All six of them had faced such hardships before. Their spirit animals helped them; they knew how to cross the land without leaving a trace. But they were still in danger from a scout who searched for them from above.

Every now and then Rollan caught sight of Wikam the Just's vulture floating in wide circles over the land, its ragged wings catching every warm updraft, its keen eyes in its featherless red skull searching, always searching. Whenever Essix gave a warning cry, Anka had the four Greencloaks and Worthy freeze where they stood, and she camouflaged them until the huge bird had passed.

Every evening, Rollan sent Essix aloft to check on their pursuers. He would close his eyes, unsteady on his feet until he blinked and opened his eyes again.

"Still on our trail," he reported every night.

Relentless.

The Oathbound were relentless.

The Greencloaks, with Anka in the lead and Worthy bringing up the rear, were crossing a land of bare, weathered red rocks that the wind had twisted into odd, bulbous shapes.

Rollan was walking two steps ahead of Meilin. He closed his eyes and suddenly tripped, sprawling onto the stony ground.

“Ow,” he mumbled. He scrambled to his feet, looking up at the cloudless sky. “Essix is to the south. The vulture is coming.”

Anka, who looked reddish and weathered like the rocks they were crossing, hissed out what sounded like a curse. “Hurry.” She pointed at a shelf of rock with a shady spot below it. “There.”

Quickly they put their spirit animals into dormant state and shoved their bags of supplies into the hiding place, then squeezed themselves in so the shadow of the rock overhead covered them. Anka went still, and they all turned the same lined, red shade of the rocks.

The air was dusty, and it tickled in Meilin’s nose, but she didn’t dare sneeze. She was sitting next to Rollan, with Abeke on her other side. They waited in a heavy silence for a few minutes.

“Anything?” Anka whispered to Rollan.

There was a pause while he looked at the land through Essix’s eyes. “It’s still circling,” he reported.

They were silent. Meilin felt the hardness of the stone beneath her. She wished she could shift to a more comfortable position, but that would give them away to the bird that hunted them.

After a few more quiet minutes, Conor asked a question, hardly moving his lips. “I’ve been thinking. What if the leaders of Erdas and the Oathbound *do* break up the Greencloaks? What will happen?”

They all considered it. Meilin knew that, while the Oathbound were a threat, the real enemy was whoever had sent the Fakecloaks, as Rollan had called them, to attack the meeting in the Citadel. That mysterious person or group was the true enemy—*they* had tricked the leaders of Erdas into thinking the Greencloaks were assassins. They were using the leaders and the Oathbound for their own purposes. Breaking up the Greencloaks might be only part of their plans.

A moment later, Meilin heard Abeke’s soft voice. “Do you remember our Greencloak vow?”

Rollan answered immediately. “Yes.”

“*Shhhh*,” interrupted Anka.

Rollan went on in a whisper. “Our vow is a lifetime commitment to stand united with the Greencloaks and defend Erdas.”

“Exactly,” Abeke said. “United. It’s like what Olvan said when he sent us on this mission.”

“We have to stay true to each other, he said,” Conor put in.

“Not only that,” Abeke went on. “We Greencloaks are ... ” She paused. “I don’t know how to describe it. We’re like the glue that keeps all of Erdas from falling apart.”

“Glue, seriously?” whispered Rollan.

Meilin heard Worthy snort out a laugh.

“Can you all please shut up?” Anka hissed in a whisper. “Or at least don’t move for the next ten minutes? Unless,” she added acidly, “you actually *want* that vulture to see us.”

As she spoke, Meilin saw the shadow of the great vulture cross the sunlit rock just beyond their hiding place. She stilled, trying not to breathe.

And she remembered what the emperor had said to her—that the Marked of Zhong should *belong* to Zhong. He had seen her not as a person, not as Meilin, daughter of General Teng, but as an *asset* and a *resource*. “If we were just Marked,” she whispered slowly, “and not Greencloaks, eventually our countries would use us as weapons.”

“But there’s no war,” Conor whispered.

“There would be,” Worthy put in, his voice sardonic.

Meilin didn’t nod, but she agreed. Without the Greencloaks to keep the peace, the great countries of Erdas would fracture. Everything would fall apart.

“We would have to fight each other,” Conor said, and Meilin could hear the horror in his voice.

She felt it, too. Fight against Abeke? Against Conor? Against *Rollan*? No. Never.

But what if none of them were given any choice?

Abeke’s voice was the barest whisper. “It’s up to us. There is some force that’s trying to disband the Greencloaks. It will try to divide us

from each other. In the same way, it wants to divide the great nations of Erdas from each other. But we have to fight it. Together. The gifts will help, starting with the Heart of the Land. And so will our friendship. *We* are all of Erdas, united.”

At Abeke’s words, Meilin felt goose bumps prickle over the skin of her arms. She had always admired her friend’s wisdom, but Abeke had spoken a deeper truth. They faced a mysterious force that had already killed the Emperor of Zhong, and now it was going after the Greencloaks. It would try to divide them. To destroy the Greencloaks forever. After that, there would be chaos. War. Death.

There was a long, awed silence.

“So you’re saying we really do have to be glue,” Rollan whispered. “I guess that means we’re stuck with each other.” Meilin could hear the strain in his voice. He was trying to lighten a heavy moment.

Moving slowly, Meilin edged her hand over the cool, lined rock until her fingers touched his.

Yes, Rollan, she thought. We’re stuck.



SNEAK ATTACK

THE NEXT MORNING THEY LEFT THE STONE LANDS, moving into a rocky, forested area thick with pine trees and loud with waterfalls. Rollan remembered passing through land like this before, on his first mission with the Greencloaks—before he'd actually *been* a Greencloak. They'd followed Conor's vision of Arax, trying to find the Granite Ram talisman. In this part of Amaya, the air was dry and cold, and the sky was a deep blue without a single cloud.

The lake with the island called the Heart of the Land was not far away, Anka told them. They only had to stay ahead of Wikam the Unjust and his Oathbound trackers for a few more days, and they would be there.

And then, they all hoped, they would figure out how to *reveal* the rock.

Rollan still wasn't sure what that meant, exactly. The night before, Meilin had brought the rock out again, had unwrapped it, and they'd gathered to look at it.

"So what're you supposed to do with it?" Worthy had asked.

"Reveal it," Meilin had told him.

Then he'd reached out, grabbed the rock, and started picking at the scales that seemed to cover it.

"Stop that!" Meilin said. "You'll break it."

Worthy had dropped the rock on the ground, then bent to pick it up again. “It’s a rock. It’s not going to break.”

At that, Meilin had snatched the rock away from him, wrapped it up, and turned her back on Worthy.

The masked boy shrugged. “I was only trying to help.”

After a day of hard travel, they set up a rough camp at the side of a stream that rushed loudly through mossy stones. They ate a cold dinner of travel biscuits, jerky, and dried apples. Anka, of course, was not to be seen. Conor sat quietly talking to Abeke, Briggan close to his side. Uraza was at the edge of their camp, on guard. Worthy sat on a fallen log, throwing bits of twig into the stream.

Jhi, who was not the best traveler, had been dormant all day. With a flash of light, Meilin called her out. The panda’s black eye-spots made her face seem almost mournful as she looked around the meager campsite; then she lumbered to a nearby tree and started stripping it of its brown, late-autumn leaves.

“Not her favorite,” Rollan said. His arm barely hurt anymore, and didn’t need any more Jhi spit. He still had a smudge of a bruise, a sore spot over his cheekbone, another reminder of their fight.

“She’d rather have bamboo,” Meilin acknowledged.

Rollan pointed upstream. “Essix saw a waterfall up that way,” he said to Meilin. “Want to take a look?”

Meilin set aside the sword she’d been sharpening obsessively and got to her feet.

Worthy turned his slitted pupils on them. “Where are you going, Rollan and Meilin?” He grinned. “Reilin, I mean.”

Looking over at Meilin, Rollan saw that her face had turned bright red. He knew he was blushing, too. For once, he didn’t have a sarcastic answer ready. Instead, he just glared at Worthy.

Worthy laughed—until Meilin turned her own glare on him. “Yipes!” Worthy said, and fell off the log he’d been sitting on.

Rollan stalked out of the camp, heading upstream. Meilin followed him, leaving Jhi to her dinner.

Reilin. Ridiculous!

They went along the stream in awkward silence, climbing over mossy rocks, winding around ferns and pine trees, until they came to the pebbly bank of a pool. The fresh, clear water stood at the base of a waterfall, which poured from a notch in a cliff high above. The falling water hitting the pool was so loud, Rollan could feel it in his bones.

The air was colder here, and a chilly mist from the waterfall drifted over them. Meilin shivered, and Rollan stepped closer. In silence they watched the swags of white water pour down, turn to lace, and then slam into the pool at the base of the cliff. Rollan had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

He moved even closer to Meilin, speaking right into her ear so she could hear him over the roar of the waterfall. She had droplets of water in her braided hair, shining like pearls. “I remember something Tarik once told me,” Rollan said. “He said, *I want to know Erdas in all her different forms of beauty*. And so do I.”

Meilin nodded, her face still and serious. “Erdas would be less beautiful if it was divided, or at war.”

Rollan looked down, because meeting her eyes would be too intense. “I can’t imagine having to fight you, Lady Panda.”

“For one thing,” Meilin said, smiling, “you’d lose.”

Rollan laughed. *That* was true.

And then, a smile still on her lips, Meilin leaned closer.

They had kissed each other once before, but it had been during a moment of excitement and happiness, and it had lasted about two seconds. Maybe less. Was she ... Were they going to kiss again?

Rollan felt half afraid, half excited, and half ...

Wait, that was too many halves.

Shut up, he told himself, and, leaning toward Meilin, he closed his eyes.



A shrill scream pierced the air, even louder than the booming roar of the waterfall.

Rollan jerked away from Meilin. His eyes popped open.

There were sounds of shouting and yowling—Worthy—the roar of a big cat—Uraza—and then the clash of weapons.

“The camp,” Meilin gasped. “It must be under attack.”

As one, they turned and raced toward the others, dodging trees, skidding over the mossy rocks. The sun was close to setting—it was hard to see where they were going.

Meilin reached camp first, Rollan half a step behind her. Their friends were in the thick of a battle, one they were already losing. The shadowy forest around their campsite was swarming with Oathbound fighters, who darted and hid between the trees, not venturing into the clearing, but flinging knives, shooting arrows, and hurling spears.

Briggan was a gray blur as he leaped on the nearest Oathbound and bore her, screaming, to the ground. Conor had pulled out his ax, but he had nobody to use it on—the Oathbound attackers kept striking briefly and then melting back into the darkening forest.

There was a scream from among the trees—Uraza was out there, stealthily hunting, a swift and deadly shadow.

A thrown spear had pinned Worthy’s crimson cloak to the log he’d been sitting on; he was frantically trying to get the cloak off so he could stand up and fight.

Abeke had just finished stringing her bow. From his place on the edge of the camp, Rollan saw an Oathbound aim an arrow at her.

“Abeke!” he shouted. “Look out!”

The enemy arrow streaked across the camp. Calmly, Abeke looked up, and with leopardlike speed, snatched the arrow out of the air, flipped it, knocked it on her bowstring, and fired it back in the direction it had come from. Rollan heard a cry as it struck the Oathbound archer.

Meanwhile, another Oathbound was venturing into the camp with a spear ready, approaching Conor from behind.

Rollan drew his long knife and opened his mouth to yell a warning to his friend, when Anka struck the spearman from nowhere, a focused blow to the face. Then she disappeared again, and the spearman dropped to the ground, blood fountaining from his nose.

“Did you teach her that?” Rollan asked Meilin.

“Duck!” she shouted.

He didn't question that kind of order. He hit the dirt, and Meilin aimed a swift blow where his head had been, knocking the swooping vulture out of the air. The bird flopped to the ground, then awkwardly flapped its wings to get airborne again.

Climbing to his feet, Rollan heard Essix's outraged shriek—the falcon *really* hated the vulture. Using the speed of his bond with the bird, Rollan swooped into the clearing. His dagger blocked a knife thrown by a shadowy figure, who now darted behind a tree. "There!" he shouted to Essix, and the falcon dived down to claw at the knife-thrower's eyes.

Finally freeing his red cloak, Worthy jumped up from the log, his curled fingers bristling with his retractable claws. Seeing that the Oathbound were hiding among the trees, he yowled in frustration. "Cowards!" he shouted at them.

But even more Oathbound were coming. The air was thick with arrows that, somehow, didn't quite seem to hit their targets—Rollan thought they probably had Anka's chameleon power to thank for that. A dagger flashed past his face and embedded itself in a tree behind him.

"There are too many!" Meilin shouted as she fought against three shadowy figures at the edge of the camp.

"We have to retreat," Anka ordered. She was a blur of night-black and green. "Come on!"

"But the supplies!" Worthy protested.

"Leave them!" Anka ordered.

Meilin disarmed one opponent, ducked a spear thrust from another, and raced to follow Anka. Conor and Briggan followed, as did Worthy.

Rollan started after them, then took a quick detour to grab the pack containing Tarik's cloak. An arrow hit the pack as he slung it over his shoulder; he raced past Abeke, who was backing out of the clearing, keeping an arrow nocked, covering their retreat. Uraza bounded past her, and she turned and ran.

The five Greencloaks and Worthy fled from the camp, past the waterfall, and kept going farther upstream until they had left their attackers behind. Panting, they stopped in a clearing, where they stood knee-deep in ferns. The sun was just setting, and the dim and dusty light

of evening had settled over the forest. In half an hour, it would be fully dark.

Rollan saw Conor cock his head, listening, his hearing acute thanks to his bond with Briggan. “They’re not coming.”

“We’re clear—for now,” Abeke agreed.

Rollan pulled out the arrow that had hit the pack and handed it to her; she nodded and added it to her quiver. He was aware of Essix perched on a nearby branch, settling her feathers after her fight with Wikam the Just’s vulture.

“Is everyone all right?” Meilin asked, inspecting her sword, wiping it clean on her trousers, then sheathing it. She looked around to see everyone nod.

Rollan frowned. “Why did they let us go?”

“We were too mighty?” Worthy said with a shrug. “We fought too fiercely?”

Rollan gave him a look that said, *You are such an idiot.*

“I mean it,” Worthy protested. “Did you see that thing Abeke did, catching the arrow?” He mimed drawing back a string and firing a bow. “It was amazing!”

“Yeah,” Rollan agreed. “But the Oathbound outnumbered us five to one.”

“They definitely could have taken us,” Meilin put in.

Rollan knew she was right. Then he let out a breath, realizing what was happening. “They haven’t been hunting us. They’ve been driving us.” He glanced at Abeke, the best hunter in their group, and she nodded, agreeing. “*Oh,*” Rollan went on. “They don’t want us.”

“What do you mean?” Worthy asked. “They’re hunting and arresting all the Greencloaks they can find.”

“They might want us,” Rollan clarified, “eventually. But what they want first is the rock. The gift. Wikam the Unjust must know about the Heart of the Land.”

Meilin nodded, understanding. “I think you’re right. They’ll wait for us to reveal the rock, and then they’ll try to take it from us.”

“We can’t let that happen,” Conor said seriously.

“Maybe we should split up,” Abeke said. “Conor and I could lead them astray while Meilin and Rollan head for the island in the lake.”

“And me,” Worthy said.

“No,” Meilin said. “I know we’ve had to split up on other missions, but on this one we can’t. It’s like what Rollan said: We’re glue. We have to stick together.”

“We have to stay true,” Conor added, “like Olvan said.”

Anka stepped out of the shadows; her features were blurred, hard to read. “Make up your minds. What are we doing?”

“We can’t turn back,” Meilin said. “Somehow, the four gifts are the key to saving the Greencloaks.”

“And maybe more than that,” Abeke put in.

“So we head for the lake,” Meilin said, “and once the rock is revealed, we’ll figure out how to evade the Oathbound trackers. Anka can help us with her chameleon powers. Agreed?”

The others, including Anka, nodded.

“Can we rest here tonight?” Worthy asked.

“It depends on how close the trackers are,” Meilin answered. “Rollan, can you take a look?”

With a nod, Rollan called up to Essix; he could see her amber eyes watching him from a high branch in a nearby tree. With a rush of wind, she launched herself into the air, swooping high, flapping her wings to gain height.

Rollan closed his eyes, felt the usual dizzying rush of darkness and wind, and then saw a falcon’s view of the forest. From this high, the sky was pinkish-gray to the west where the sun had gone down, and deep blue-black to the east where the night was rising. The waterfall was a strip of lacy white that almost glowed in the fading twilight; the stream was a shiny black ribbon running through the dark clouds of trees. Essix’s keen gaze showed Rollan the Oathbound trackers in the Greencloaks’ camp, going through the packs, tossing food and other supplies onto the ground. Wikam the Just watched them with arms folded, his bony shoulders hunched.

“They’re searching for the rock,” he said aloud, without opening his eyes.

He tried to count. The Oathbound wore black, so they were hard to see among the trees, but he thought there were about fifteen of them, including Wikam. A few had been wounded in the fight; they were being tended.

From the corner of Essix's eye Rollan saw a flash of black, and Wikam's vulture struck the falcon hard from the side—a sneak attack. His vision whirled as Essix tumbled, then steadied as she caught herself and banked and met the vulture's next attack head on. The two birds clashed together—Essix's talons tearing at the vulture's wrinkly red-skinned head and malevolent mud-brown eyes. Its hooked beak—made for disemboweling already-dead prey—ripped at the falcon. There was a spray of blood, and Essix released her talons and fell away. The vulture gave a harsh croak of victory.

The ground spun closer as the falcon plunged downward.

"*Essix!*" Rollan gasped, dizzy.

"What's going on?" he heard Meilin ask.

"Hold on a minute," he panted, and felt a hand on his shoulder, steadying him.

Come on, Essix—fly!

There was another terrifying moment of Essix plummeting from the sky. Then the falcon's wings caught the air, and her fall turned into a wobbly glide. Rollan spied the vulture, slower, flapping after her. She went higher, using her speed to stay ahead of the other bird.

As the falcon climbed even higher, Rollan realized what the vulture had been trying to prevent Essix from seeing.

With a gasp, he opened his eyes, blinking, then gazing around in horror at his friends, at Worthy, at the faded shadow that was Anka.

"It's not just trackers," he said. "Those are only scouts. There's a whole *army* of Oathbound out there. And they're coming after us."



HIGHNESS

AT THE DOOR WAITED THE LEADER OF THE CITADEL'S Oathbound guards, Brunhild the Merry. "Your Highness," she said, bowing.

Princess Song did not turn from the mirror. Her hair was smooth, intricately braided, secured with jeweled pins. Her face was heavily made up, her lips red, her eyes outlined in black, her dainty nose and cheeks dusted with rice powder.

"Your Highness," Brunhild repeated.

Song watched her own face. It was perfect. Unmoving, like ice.

The proper way to speak to a princess was to call her *Your Highness*. A ruler—an emperor, a king, or a queen—was addressed as *Your Majesty*.

It meant something, Song knew, that the leaders of the lands of Erdas still referred to her as *Highness* and not *Majesty*.

Her father, the emperor, was dead. Zhong *needed* an empress.

Lifting her chin, Song considered her own face. Every feature was perfect. It was the face of a *Highness*, but it was not majestic. Not as her father had been. People did not look to her for guidance. No, they thought *quiet* and *obedient* and *pretty*.

Song had told Meilin that she envied her, and it was true. Even without the careful makeup of a royal princess, Meilin was beautiful—as beautiful as a drawn sword. Meilin looked the way a true empress would look. Powerful. Skilled. Dangerous. Deadly.

Song knew she would never look like that.

In order to take her proper place—in order to help the people of Zhong—she would have to prove herself all those things.

“Your Highness,” Brunhild repeated again from the door.

Song allowed one carefully penciled eyebrow to lift just a hair higher. It was an expression her father had made many times. In the mirror, she saw the Oathbound guard’s reflection shift uncomfortably.

“Your Majesty,” Brunhild corrected herself.

Song did not allow herself to smile. But she was satisfied.

She owned Brunhild’s loyalty. The Oathbound was sworn to serve her. But she had a great deal of work to do before the leaders of Erdas would consider her an equal. And then, on returning to Zhong, she would have to convince an entire country of her ability to rule. To be *Majesty* instead of *Highness*.

Gracefully, Princess Song rose to her feet. “Have the leaders gathered?”

Brunhild bowed. “They have. They await you.”

A regal nod, and Song led the way from the Zhongese wing to the Citadel’s main meeting room.

The chamber in which her father had been killed.

By Greencloaks.

Despite an intensive search by the Oathbound, the four youngest Greencloaks had all escaped, leaving their comrades behind.

As Song stepped into the meeting chamber, her eyes went to the six-sided table that stood in the center of the room. Its surface had been scrubbed, but the stain of her father’s blood remained, soaked deeply into the wood.

Sitting at the table was the Niloan High Chieftain, old and set in his ways. Next to him was the Euran Queen, who was always accompanied by a retinue of three or four nobles from her kingdom. She was young, very blond, and had oddly vacant eyes. The other leader was the Amayan Prime Minister, a middle-aged woman with a disapproving pout on her face. The Ambassador from Stetriol was there, too. She had been wounded in the same attack that had killed Song’s father. Her arm was

crooked in a sling and her skin was ashy pale. She should probably still be in bed, recovering.

Song circled the table until she reached the Emperor of Zhong's seat.

The last time the leaders had met, she had stood behind this chair, eyes lowered, until she had dared speak out, defending the Greencloaks.

Zhong must not appear weak to the other nations, even now. Especially now.

Decisively, she sat in the emperor's chair, folded her hands in her lap, and looked around the table at the other leaders.

They stared back at her. But none challenged her right to sit at the table with them. Song allowed herself a tiny moment of triumph. The rest of the meeting would be a challenge—her chance to begin proving herself as a true leader.

The Niloan High Chieftain cleared his throat and began. "Now that the *princess* has finally arrived," he said in a voice tinged with complaint, "we can decide what to do next about the Greencloaks."

"I'll tell you what we must do," said the Amayan Prime Minister sharply. "The Greencloaks must be broken up and returned to their own lands. Those who were involved in this disaster must be rooted out and prosecuted."

"The Greencloaks are bad" was the Euran Queen's contribution.

"*Bad* doesn't even begin to describe them," complained the Niloan High Chieftain. "They are corrupt. They serve only each other. They owe their proper leaders no allegiance. Clearly they cannot be trusted."

The queen looked around the table, blinking. "They cannot be trusted," she repeated.

Princess Song sighed inwardly. The Euran Queen was lovely, but there wasn't much going on behind her pretty blue eyes. "I advise patience," Song said.

"Patience," scoffed the Amayan Prime Minister. "There can be no doubt about the Greencloaks. The attack in this very chamber told us all we need to know about them."

"And yet they *have* served all the nations of Erdas," Song said.

"They served in order to gain power for themselves," the prime minister said. "And look where it has led!" She pointed at the bloodstain

in the middle of the table. “Your own country, Zhong, has been left leaderless!”

Song took a steadying breath. Yes, she mourned her father. But now was a time for action, not tears. *She* would guide her people, if they’d only give her a chance. “As we all know,” she said calmly, “Greencloaks all over the world are being arrested and arraigned.”

“And when we catch them all, we’ll put their traitorous leaders on trial—for murder!” shouted the Amayan Prime Minister.

“The Niloan Greencloaks must be returned to Nilo,” the high chieftain put in, folding his skinny arms. “In my country we have harsh penalties for betrayers.”

“They must be treated fairly,” Song insisted. Carefully she caught the eye of the Euran Queen and gave an encouraging nod.

“They must be treated fairly,” the queen repeated.

The ambassador had not yet spoken. Now she cleared her throat and said, “The world is watching us now.” She nodded at Song. “Stetriol agrees with ... with the daughter of the Emperor of Zhong. The Greencloaks must be gathered and sent to Greenhaven, where they can be imprisoned until they’re given a trial—a *fair* trial.”

“Did they give the emperor a fair trial before they killed him?” demanded the high chieftain. “They are assassins. Which one of us will they attack next?”

The meeting continued. Now Princess Song stayed quiet, observing how the leaders’ tempers were fraying. There were signs of disunity. As the leaders argued, they didn’t seem to realize what a danger that meant. Maybe they had been hidden away for too long to understand that leaders were supposed to *lead*. Not sit around arguing with each other. At one point, the Amayan Prime Minister banged her fist on the table and sourly told the Euran Queen to stay quiet unless she had something intelligent to say. In response, the queen’s eyes filled with tears. Gathering her courtiers, she fled the room, weeping. The Niloan High Chieftain followed, snorting his disgust and stalking out.

As the meeting ended, Princess Song, followed by her Oathbound guards, headed for the Citadel tower where the two Greencloak leaders were still imprisoned. The rest of the Greencloaks captured in the Citadel

had been sent ahead to Greenhaven, but these two remained for questioning.

At the tower, a guard bowed and opened the door. Princess Song entered the cell where the Greencloak leader was being held. The other one, Lenori, was next door, but it was Olvan who Song wanted to see.

Olvan had been bitten by Brunhild the Merry's spirit animal, a viper. The snake's venom had turned his body hard, like stone. Orders had been given that Olvan should be treated with just enough of the antidote to keep him alive, but not enough to allow him to move or to be a danger. He could only breathe, and blink.

The Greencloak leader was a big, gray-bearded old man with a stern face set in a fierce frown. Some of the guards must have lifted him out of bed, for Olvan was propped against one wall, as still as a sculpture.

Seeing Princess Song, he blinked. His lips twitched, as if he wanted to speak. But the venom had its hold on him, so he could not move any more than that.

"Greetings," Song said politely. "I expect you are worried about the four young Greencloaks. The Heroes of Erdas, as they're called."

Olvan blinked.

"They have not been captured. At last report, they fled to Amaya." Song stepped to the cell's window and looked out. "You have a nice view here of the mountains." She glanced at the old man, who could only stare straight ahead. "I don't suppose you've seen it, though, have you?"

She stepped into his line of sight. His face, she thought, grew sterner. Angry, even. She sighed softly. "Why Amaya?" she wondered. She gave her head a brief shake. "They cannot hope to escape. The Oathbound are everywhere."

She waited a moment, as if to allow him a chance to respond. When he remained silent, she went on. "Your Greencloaks are being gathered in Greenhaven. The castle is to become their prison. We thought it a small mercy to hold them in a familiar place until they can be put on trial."

As she continued, she lifted her chin, as if wrapping a cloak of *Majesty* around herself. She spoke as the Empress of Zhong would speak. "On trial for what, you may wonder? And I will tell you. You,

Olvan, and all the Greencloaks, are charged with treason, and with the coldhearted murder of the Emperor of Zhong.” For just a moment, she remembered the bloodstained table, and her voice wavered. “My father.”

The Greencloak leader did nothing but stare straight ahead, without even blinking. It was as if he hadn’t even heard her words.



THE WAVE

ABEKE HAD CHECKED HER ARROWS THE DAY BEFORE.

As morning approached, she checked them again, looking them over one by one as she walked. The shafts were straight, that was the main thing. The feather fletchings were balanced. The tips were razor-sharp. These arrows would fly true.

They would need to. Rollan's report the night before had horrified all of them.

An army. An entire army of Oathbound soldiers, hundreds of them, with the relentless Wikam the Just as their leader. Abeke glanced at the sky, but she didn't see the vulture. She had tried shooting at the bird before, but it usually flew too high. Now she couldn't risk losing any arrows.

After hearing Rollan's report, Anka had led them through the forest, keeping them invisible so any Oathbound scouts would not be able to track them. They had no time to stop and rest for the night. The trail led uphill toward the lake where the island called Heart of the Land was located. If they went quickly and quietly, Anka said, they could reach the lake by early morning.

Just as the sky lightened with dawn, Anka let them rest for a few moments. While Abeke inspected her bow, Uraza flopped on the ground beside her. The others sat, and Worthy pawed through the one bag of supplies that Rollan had managed to rescue from their camp.

Worthy pulled something out of the pack and quickly handed it off to Rollan. Abeke didn't get a good look at the object.

Standing, Rollan yawned loudly, then he stepped away to stretch and get ready. When he returned, he was wearing an enormous brown cloak he'd picked up in town. It looked bulky and warm in the Amayan heat, but Abeke supposed he found the weight of it comforting, after giving up Tarik's cloak.

Worthy peered into the bag. "Nothing in here but medical supplies." He looked up, his eyes wide behind his mask. "Do you know what this *means*?"

"No," Conor said wearily. He sat with his back against a tree, Briggan's head on his leg. "What does it mean?"

"No breakfast," Worthy said sadly.

And no dinner, either, Abeke knew. She gritted her teeth and tried not to think about it.

"Let's go," Anka said. The sky was growing light. "It's not far now."

Groaning, they all got to their feet. Abeke saw Meilin pat the pouch where she kept the rock—the unrevealed Heart of the Land. Checking to be sure it was still there.

The path they followed wound between huge pine trees. It was studded with stones and crossed by twisted roots—Abeke had to watch where she was going, or she could easily fall. Uraza paced beside her, ears pricked, violet eyes watchful. Anka and Conor hiked a few steps ahead with Briggan. Meilin, Worthy, and Rollan came after.

"Did you hear that?" Worthy asked.

"What?" Meilin asked, stopping in her tracks and cocking her head. "Is it the Oathbound scouts?"

"No," Worthy said, sounding disgusted. "It was my stomach."

Uraza turned her head and growled at him.

"Yes, *growling*," Worthy complained. "I'm starving!"

"You've missed exactly one meal," Meilin said calmly, and started walking again. "You're hardly starving."

"I *am*," Worthy said dolefully, following. "Starving to death." Then he glanced over his shoulder at Rollan, who walked two steps behind him with Essix. The gyrfalcon had been slightly wounded in her fight against

the vulture. She was now riding on Rollan's shoulder, looking ruffled and annoyed. "Rollan," Worthy said, "you're from Amaya. You must know how to forage for food. Tell us where to find roots and berries."

"Oh sure," Rollan said sharply. "If somebody threw roots and berries on a trash heap in Concorba, I'm your guy. That's the kind of foraging I know about."

"*Cranky*," complained Worthy.

Abeke couldn't stand another second of this. "Worthy, were you ever in your entire life unsure of where your next meal was coming from?"

"Not until now," Worthy answered grumpily.

"Oh, *poor* you," Abeke heard Rollan mutter, and he did sound a little cranky.

Abeke didn't blame him. They might have let Worthy join them, but the Redcloak boy was still intensely annoying. Some of the time.

They traveled as the morning continued, climbing higher and higher, until Abeke felt light-headed from hunger and the altitude.

Ever since the attack on their camp, there had not been a sign of the Oathbound, neither the trackers nor the army. Abeke thought it meant Rollan had been right the day before—Wikam the Just and his Oathbound knew about the rock and wanted the Greencloaks to *reveal* it before they pounced.

Well, she and her friends would be ready for them. Uraza was ready, for sure. Abeke had never seen the leopard so on edge, or Briggan, either. Both spirit animals were eager to fight.

There was a grumbling sound.

"Did you hear that?" Worthy said.

"*Stop* complaining about your stomach!" Meilin snapped.

"I'm not!" Worthy protested. Abeke turned to see him pointing at the sky. "Thunder," he said grimly.

He was right. Abeke had been watching the path, trying not to trip, and she hadn't noticed how the morning was getting darker instead of lighter. Now the clouds were gray, and so low they seemed to be snagged on the pointed tips of the pine trees. Distant thunder growled again.

Quickly, Abeke unstrung her bow and wrapped it in its leather case. The string couldn't get too wet, or it wouldn't function when she needed

it. She wrapped the arrows in the quiver, too.

“No, Worthy,” she heard Meilin say, a little scornfully, “we are not stopping to shelter from the storm. We have to go on.”

There was more grumbling. Worthy, this time, and not the thunder.

Abeke smiled to herself. She suspected this was more than just Devin Trunswick’s fussiness showing through. As a Redcloak, Worthy had taken on aspects of his spirit animal, the black panther.

Conor stepped up to walk at her side. “What are you smiling about?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Worthy. He’s like Uraza—like most cats. He doesn’t like getting wet.”

Conor glanced down at Briggan, who trotted at his side with his tongue lolling. “We don’t mind the rain.” Then he nodded toward Rollan, who was coming up the rutted path behind them. “But I bet we’re all going to wish for our old cloaks by the time today is over.”

Perhaps Rollan had been wise to replace his after all. Abeke agreed, and they went on. A few spatters of rain began to fall, heavy drops that made little craters in the dusty path.

“Abeke,” Conor said, in a low voice, “speaking of getting wet . . . ”

She nodded to show him that she was listening.

“Four nights ago I had a dream,” he said.

She glanced quickly at him. “Not a—”

“No,” he reassured her. “Not a Wyrms nightmare. I’m done with those. Something else.” He swallowed and looked away. “Almost as scary.”

Abeke stopped short and called to the others to join them. They gathered on the path in a tight circle.

“What’s the matter?” Meilin asked.

“Conor must have grown faint from hunger,” Worthy said.

All five of the Greencloaks scowled at him.

“Sor-ry,” Worthy said, rolling his eyes.

“Conor had a dream,” Abeke explained. As she spoke, the wind from the coming storm grew stronger. The pine branches in the forest all around them trembled, and the air turned sharply colder. Thunder rumbled in the sky, closer than it had been before.

Rollan glanced up at the gray clouds. “Ominous,” he said.

“You had a prophetic dream?” Meilin asked, all business.

Conor nodded. “I think so. I’ve had it twice now, so I figure I’d better tell you about it, just in case.” He looked around the group. “I was standing in a high place. The first time I had the dream, I couldn’t tell where I was. The second time, I could see that I was standing on a stone surface, maybe the tower of a castle or a cliff. At the beginning of the dream, everything is dark. Then a light comes up, and I’m looking over the surface of an ocean.”

His blue eyes seemed to be seeing that sight again, Abeke thought. They had a faraway look.

“The ocean is completely flat,” Conor went on. “It’s creepy. Too quiet. I stand there for a long time, and then I notice that the water is pulling away.” He shook his head. “Or like it’s taking a deep breath. Then the noise starts.” Above them, the thunder grumbled, and Conor jerked with surprise. “Like that. Like thunder, but without stopping. I’m still looking out at the ocean, and I see a shadow in the distance. It grows taller and taller, rising from the surface of the water, as tall as a mountain, until it blots out the light, and then I see that it’s a wave. A huge wall of water rushing toward me.” He swallowed.

Abeke was staring at him; so were the others, their mouths open, their eyes wide.

“And then what happens?” Anka asked dryly.

Conor took a deep breath. “The wave leans over, and the top of it turns white with foam as it crests.” He shook his head. “I can’t do anything. I just stand there and watch it as it arches overhead. It’s roaring, thundering. My heart is pounding, but I can’t move. And then it crashes down over me.”

“Let me guess,” Worthy put in. “Then you wake up.”

Meilin turned a fierce glare on him. He made a noise that sounded like *meep* and backed away.

But Conor was nodding. “Yes, then I wake up.”

To Abeke’s surprise, Anka had put her spirit animal, the chameleon, into passive state. She stood there, unhidden. Her face was pale, and she had deep shadows under her eyes. “Come with me,” she said, without her usual sharpness. “I want you to see something.”

They followed as Anka led them up the steepest, rockiest part of the path yet. The trees grew closer together, too. With the clouds like a low ceiling overhead, it was almost like being in a dim cave, Abeke thought.

And then, suddenly, the path grew level. Four more steps, and they came out of the forest to stand on the pebbled shore of a lake so wide they couldn't see the other side of it.

In the middle of the lake was an island.

“Is that it?” Anka asked in a subdued voice, pointing. “Is that what you saw in your dream?”

As one, they all turned to Conor to see what he would say.



STORM

RESTING HIS HAND ON BRIGGAN'S ROUGH-FURRED HEAD, Conor gazed out at the island in the middle of the lake.

He had expected the Heart of the Land to look like a regular island. Like a low hump in the middle of the lake, with trees growing on it.

This island was nothing like that.

It was like a huge, square pillar jutting out of the water. There was a thin ribbon of beach around its base, where waves lapped, but then it went straight up—all gray, rocky cliff face—until it ended in a flat top. It was taller than the tallest castle tower Conor had ever seen, and from where they stood on the shore of the lake, its steep sides looked impossible to climb.

But that's where they had to go to reveal the rock that shared its name with this island—the Heart of the Land.

"Is it?" Rollan interrupted.

Conor blinked. "What?"

"Is that the place you were standing in your dream?" Meilin said, pointing at the island.

Conor frowned and studied it. "I don't know." His dream had been so dark. "I'm pretty sure it was an ocean, not a lake."

"Water, though," Rollan pointed out, "and a high place."

"It *could* be," Conor said slowly. He looked around at his friends, and at Worthy and Anka. "It doesn't matter if it is or not. We still have to go

out there, right?”

“No way,” Worthy said quickly.

“Shut up, Worthy,” Rollan and Abeke said at the same time. They grinned at each other, then quickly turned somber again, knowing how much danger they were about to put themselves in.

“No, seriously,” Worthy said, putting his hands on his hips. “I mean, *look* at the island. It’s not even an island! It’s made out of cliffs! And we don’t have a boat, so we can’t get out there. *You* can’t, I mean, because I’m not going. And then you’ll have to climb to the top of it in the middle of a storm. And now there’s this wave thing that Conor dreamed about that might be coming? You’d have to be crazy to try it.”

“So anyway,” Rollan said, ignoring Worthy, “I’ll send Essix out to take a look around.”

“We need to hurry,” Meilin reminded him. “The Oathbound will know we’re here, and they’ll be coming.”

Rollan nodded, then turned and whispered something to Essix on his shoulder. After a moment, Essix launched into the air. With a shrill cry, she swooped higher, buffeted by the gusts of wind that were coming in ahead of the storm. Steadying herself, she flew straight toward the island.

Rollan closed his eyes and he frowned, concentrating. Conor knew he was seeing through Essix’s eyes.

“As much as I hate to admit it, Worthy’s not wrong,” Rollan muttered. Conor could only barely see Essix in the distance, circling the island. “This thing *is* all cliffs. But there might be a way up. There’s a flat area at the top, and a big rock shaped like a crescent moon. Huh. I thought there might be an arrow with a sign saying ‘Reveal the Heart of the Land here.’ ” He opened his eyes again. “But there’s not.”

“It doesn’t sound too promising,” Abeke said.

Rollan shrugged. “We still have to try to get up there.”

“You can’t *climb* the island,” Worthy put in, “because you can’t even *get* to the island.”

Rollan raised his eyebrows. “Essix showed me a way out there.” He pointed with his chin along the curve of the lake. “Over that way is a long strip of sand that leads out to the island. Sort of like a bridge.”

“It’s probably not sand,” Worthy said glumly. “I bet it’s quicksand.”

All four Greencloak kids glared at him.

“I know, I know,” Worthy muttered. “*Shut up, Worthy.* But I’m not wrong. This is a completely terrible idea.”



It was hard to admit, but as he stood at the end of the sand path, Conor thought Worthy might be right—again.

What Rollan had called a *bridge* was a thin line of sand winding in an S shape from the pebbly shore toward the pillar-like island. The clouds overhead were roiling, and growing darker by the minute. Thunder growled, and lightning flashed on the distant horizon. The lake’s waves were whipped by the wind, washing over the narrow strip of sand. They’d be lucky to make it out to the island.

Meilin had decided that Anka and Worthy should wait on the lakeshore to keep an eye out for the Oathbound army, and to prevent them from crossing the sand bridge if they decided to come after the Greencloaks.

“That doesn’t sound like a very rewarding task,” Worthy complained.

“You could come with us, Worthy,” Meilin said, and she gave him a sweet smile.

He flinched. “No, that’s all right. You go ahead.” Then he added under his breath, “And try not to kill yourselves while you’re at it, all right?”

To Conor’s surprise, he found himself stepping closer to Worthy. “She gave you a dangerous task,” he said. It was hard to read the face behind the white mask, but Conor thought Worthy was worried. “We’re counting on you.”

“I’ll do my best,” the other boy said. Then he added in a rush, “And ... and I’m sorry for the way I treated you, Conor. You know, back in Trunswick, and the rest of it.”

“You were having a bad day?” Conor asked.

He saw Worthy gulp. “Ha-ha,” he chuckled awkwardly. “Yes. A bad year. A bad everything. But I’m trying to be better.”

Conor was silent for a long moment. “Before the Wyrms, I might have thought that anyone who did the things you did was beyond saving. But

... ” He shook his head soberly. “When the Wyrms took me, I did bad things. And I thought for a while that it made me a bad person. But it didn’t. I am worthy. And maybe, so are you.”

He saw Worthy’s slitted eyes blinking rapidly behind his mask. Then he whispered, his voice shaking, “I hope so.”

Conor put a reassuring hand on the Redcloak boy’s shoulder. “I’m sure you will be.”

As thunder rumbled and the storm prowled closer, the four Greencloaks set off across the sand bridge. The sand was soft underfoot and shifted at every step. Waves washed across their feet. Across the choppy water, the island loomed closer as they struggled along the narrow bridge of sand. Uraza led the way, leaping from one dryish spot to the next, clearly unhappy about getting her paws wet. Abeke followed, her strides long and powerful thanks to her bond with the leopard. Then came Meilin, followed by Rollan, then Briggan, with Conor bringing up the rear, bounding with wolflike confidence.

At a distance, the island’s cliffs had seemed unscalable, like slick stone walls. But as they grew closer, Conor saw that the cliffs were covered with fissures and ledges. Even so, it still looked difficult to climb. Each wall sloped gradually outward; the top of the island was bigger than the bottom.

Ahead of Conor, Essix whirled past on a gust of wind. The blast had them all fighting to keep their feet on the sandy path. Then she banked and landed awkwardly on Rollan’s shoulder, flapping her wings to steady herself.

“She can’t fly in this storm!” Rollan shouted. His brown cloak whipped in the wind. Its shadowed inner lining almost looked green under the stormy sky.

Conor nodded, and they went on.

The thunder grew louder. Conor saw fingers of lightning probing the lake. The clouds lowered until it was almost as dark as twilight, and the wind gusted. Ahead, Conor saw Meilin stumble. He yelled out a warning, and Rollan grabbed her arm before she could tumble into the freezing lake water.

At last they trudged from the path to the narrow strip of rocky shore at the base of the island. At the same moment, the clouds opened, and an icy rain pelted down.

They gathered into a tight group. Uraza looked wet and miserable, and Briggan's tail was lowered, raindrops dripping from his fur.

"What now?" Abeke shouted to be heard above the wind and the pounding rain.

Rollan wiped the rain off his face and pointed. "There's the way up," he shouted.

At first, Conor only saw the dark gray cliffs looming overhead, streaming with water. Then he saw what Rollan was talking about.

All down the cliff face ran a narrow rock tube like a chimney, about two feet across. Water gushed down it. It was a waterfall, running from the top of the island to the bottom. They were supposed to climb up this way?

Conor glanced at Rollan, who nodded.

He knew what Worthy would have to say about this: *You're all completely crazy.*

The spirit animals would not be able to make this climb. Uraza and Briggan, and even Essix, joined Jhi in passive state.

Thunder crashed overhead, and they started up the cliff. First Rollan, who as a street kid had climbed the roofs of Concorba, evading bullies and the town militia. Then Meilin, then Abeke, and Conor last.

Rollan climbed a few feet and then shouted down at them, "There are handholds! Somebody's come this way before!"

Conor followed, finding it was true, though the handholds were covered with slippery moss and slick from the rain. The thin stream of the waterfall rushed past his right shoulder. As he climbed, he fell into a rhythm. When Abeke's booted foot left one tiny shelf of rock, Conor put a hand there and pulled himself up. The rock was gritty under his fingers, which were growing numb with cold. But the chimney of rock protected them from the worst of the wind.

Halfway up the cliff, there was a ledge just a few inches wide, a resting place. Rollan waited there for the rest of them to catch up. The

four kids clung to the gray rock face, trying to catch their breaths as the wind battered their backs.

Conor looked over his shoulder, then closed his eyes, dizzy.

“Don’t look down!” Rollan shouted from close beside him.

But Conor had already seen the tiny strip of beach where they’d started their climb ...

... and from this height, the lake surface seemed smooth. Just like in his dream. Turning his head, he looked toward the horizon, half expecting to see the huge wave. If it was coming, it would crash into the island and wash them all off the cliff and into the lake.

Instead he saw the worst of the storm bearing down on them. The boiling clouds were a sickly greenish-black and flashed with continuous lightning. Thunder boomed overhead, loud enough to shake the island.

All four of them cringed against the cliff face, holding on for dear life. Rain lashed down. The howling wind pried at their fingers as if it wanted to whirl them away to their deaths.

“We have to keep going!” Conor heard Meilin shout.

Conor opened his eyes and nodded. Following the others, he edged toward the next handhold, and suddenly his foot slipped from the edge. The sickening feeling of falling flashed through him—and then Abeke’s hand grabbed his arm.

“Hold on!” she yelled, steadying him.

It reminded him of the time he’d been having a prophetic dream at Greenhaven Castle and had sleepwalked right off the edge of a tower. Essix had snagged his cloak in her talons long enough for Abeke to grasp his arms and pull him up. Ever since then he’d been a little queasy about heights.

Abeke remembered, too. “Steady on!” she said, with a reassuring nod. She started climbing again. Conor took a deep breath, then followed. Blinking the rain out of his eyes, he looked up just as a clap of thunder broke right over the island. The rain turned abruptly colder, and every handhold became instantly crusted with ice. Lightning flashed, blindingly bright. In its aftermath, Conor saw Rollan, who was still leading, take a bad step. His boot slipped from an icy foothold, and he plunged downward.

Falling.



HEART OF THE LAND

ROLLAN HEARD ABEKE SCREAM AND AN ANGUISHED CRY from Meilin. Terror slammed into him—*I'm falling, I'm going to die*—when suddenly he wasn't falling. He was choking, and banging hard against the bumpy gray face of the cliff.

Something had him around his neck. Reaching up, he snagged taut cloth with his hand. Hoisting himself up, he eased the pressure on his throat. His feet found a tiny crack of rock to stand on, and, gasping for breath, he pressed himself against the rock face. Eyes closed, just breathing, Rollan clung to the cloth, his heart beating so hard that it felt like his whole body was shaking.

"Are you all right?" he heard Conor call from above him.

Without opening his eyes, he nodded. His throat felt bruised, and his shoulder was scraped from where he had slammed into the rock. His fingers were numb, but they clung like claws to the fabric that had stopped his fall.

Opening his eyes, he saw what it was.

Tarik's cloak, just beneath the brown layer, was now torn along the edge.

It had snagged a corner of rock, saving him.

Rollan released a shaky breath. "Thank you, Tarik," he whispered as the wind howled around him and the icy raindrops pricked like needles on his skin.

And ... thank you, Worthy, for handing him the cloak earlier.

Looking up, he saw that his friends were waiting for him. "Keep going!" he shouted at them, his voice hoarse. He saw Meilin nod and lead the way.

Trying to steady his shaking hands, he made certain his green cloak was still covered beneath the brown one, and followed. *Don't look down*, he'd told Conor. He took his own advice, focusing on each handhold, the stone gritty and cold under his fingers, streaming with icy water. At last he looked up and saw Meilin at the edge of the cliff, helping Conor over and then reaching down to him. As he stretched to take her hand, the storm gave one last roar of thunder, and the wind yanked him away from the cliff face.

But Meilin held on tightly and dragged him over the edge of the cliff and onto the top of the island.

Rollan flopped over and lay there for a second, his eyes closed, feeling the last of the rain patter on his bare face. The stone was bumpy and hard against his back. And solid. He'd come closer than he ever had before to dying. Climbing down the cliff was going to be ...

Well, he didn't want to think about it. Shivering, he opened his eyes and sat up. The other three were sitting, Abeke with her head on her knees, Conor looking out toward the horizon, where the storm was walking away on legs of lightning.

"Looking for the wave that you dreamed about?" Rollan croaked. He rubbed his throat, which was still sore. *I'll have bruises there*, he thought.

Brushing his wet hair out of his eyes, Conor shook his head. "I'm pretty sure this isn't the place."

"Completely sure would be better," Rollan said. Buffeted by the last of the wind, he got to his feet and surveyed the top of the island. As he'd seen through Essix's eyes, it was roughly square, and strangely flat, as if human hands had smoothed it. In its center was a weathered black rock about as high as his head, curved in the shape of a crescent. It seemed oddly familiar. Something about its shape ...

Meilin stepped up next to him. "It's got the same surface as the gift," she said, reaching into her pocket. Carefully she pulled out the cloth-

covered rock and unwrapped it. Conor and Abeke came to look at it, too.

And yes, Meilin was right. The huge, crescent-shaped rock in the center of the island was covered with obsidian-like black scales, just like the Heart of the Land stone.

“So now we reveal it,” Rollan said. Followed by the others, he headed for the big rock, studying it, trying to figure out why it looked so familiar. In the middle it stood about head height, and it tapered down as it curved on each side to about a foot off the ground. He stepped into the center of the crescent; Meilin stood close beside him, and Abeke and Conor just behind. It was almost like being inside a circle, enclosed by the stone. It was quiet there, a kind of stillness that went beyond protection from the last of the storm’s winds. It felt *old*, Rollan thought. Nobody had stood in this place for a long, long time.

“I think it’s important that we’re all here together,” Abeke said softly from behind him.

Rollan nodded. She was right. Without each other’s help, none of them would have made it to the top of the island.

Feeling almost reverent, Rollan laid a hand on the surface of the rock. It felt smooth under his fingers. Each scale was rounded, like a bump. Now that he was close to it, he could see that it wasn’t entirely black; some of the bumps were a lighter color, almost orange, in a strange, mottled pattern.

“There,” whispered Meilin, pointing.

Rollan looked and saw a hole in the huge stone, right at chest height, big enough to put his hand into. Immediately he understood. That is where they would reveal the Heart of the Land.

Meilin held out the rock. “You’re from Amaya,” she said to Rollan. “You should reveal it.” Conor and Abeke nodded, agreeing.

Rollan felt goose bumps creep over his skin, and it wasn’t because his clothes were sopping wet from the climb up the island. He looked around at his friends’ faces, all as serious as he knew his was. “All right, I’ll do it,” he said. In the enclosed space, his voice echoed strangely.

Solemnly, he took the rock. It was heavier than it looked, and almost seemed to pulse with warmth. Turning to the huge stone that surrounded them, he gripped the rock in his fist and put his whole hand into the hole.

It was like a tube, with a niche at the end. He pushed the stone into it. There was a click, the sound of a key turning in a lock. Quickly Rollan pulled his hand out.

A faint trembling arose from the stone at their feet. He and the others stared at each other. The mottled pattern on the huge stone that surrounded them became clearer, orange scales among the black.

Rollan examined it. He *knew* this pattern. At the same time, he finally realized why the shape of the rock had seemed so familiar. One end of the crescent had been roughly carved into the shape of a head with a wide, lizardlike mouth; the body of the lizard sculpture curved around them, ending in a stubby tail.

“A gila monster,” he breathed. He’d seen gila monsters before. They were lizards of Amaya, desert reptiles that moved slowly over the stones that baked in the summer heat. But most were much smaller than this carved monolith.

Rollan had heard the legends of the great gila monster, of course. Every region of Erdas had its own myths, stories of powerful animals and their human partners. Typically they roamed around, rescuing maidens or princes and granting wishes and some such nonsense.

Zerif had once hoped to bank on those stories by bonding four young Conquerors to imposter legends, in order to discredit the newly reborn Four Fallen. Devin Trunswick, now Worthy, had been one of those very Conquerors.

“Rollan,” whispered Abeke, her eyes wide. “Was this carving made to honor the *real* gila monster?”

As she spoke, there was a distant sound, like one huge rock scraping over another, and the trembling of the stone floor turned to shaking. A faint mist arose from the ground, filling the area inside the crescent. Then the mist started spinning slowly, becoming thicker.

To Rollan’s astonishment, as the mist swirled around, it drew into itself into the shape of a woman standing in the center of the round room made by the curve of the gila monster’s body. Her outlines were hazy, but he could see that she had a broad face with high cheekbones, a short, stocky, broad-shouldered body, and hair in two braids that hung down almost to her waist.

She was a woman long dead. She, Rollan felt sure, must have been the human partner to that legendary gila monster.

When the spirit spoke, Rollan heard it inside his head, not with his ears—a hollow, echoing rumble.

The lands of Erdas are facing their greatest threat, the spirit grated out, and they send children. Children! Her misty eyes seemed to look them over. *Eura. Nilo. Zhong.* Seeing Rollan, she nodded. *And Amaya. I am Kikimi.*

Rollan felt deeply reverent. This spirit existed outside of time. She was a legend. He bowed. “Greetings, Kikimi.”

Then he felt Meilin’s elbow in his side. “Did she speak to you?” she whispered.

“You didn’t hear her?” Rollan whispered back.

All three of the other Greencloaks shook their heads, wide-eyed.

Rollan turned back to the spirit. “Kikimi,” he said carefully, “we’ve come to reveal the Heart of the Land.”

With a sound that rumbled in Rollan’s bones like an earthquake, Kikimi nodded. Her face took on more heavy solidity. She looked like an idol carved out of living rock. When she spoke again, her hollow voice grew deeper and more echoey inside Rollan’s head. *There is a great force in nature—and in human nature—that wants everything to fall apart, to be torn until there are no countries and no families and no friendships, and there is nothing left but a vast wasteland. That is the way of distrust, disunity, division, darkness, and ...* She paused, and Rollan felt the weight of centuries bearing down on him. *Death,* the spirit concluded.

“What’s she saying?” Abeke whispered to him.

“Darkness, other d-words, death,” Rollan answered. “Now be quiet. She’s saying something else.”

The other way is unity, Kikimi intoned. *Do you choose the way of life and warmth and hope?*

“Yes,” said Rollan. He turned to his friends. “Say yes,” he urged.

“Yes!” they all said together.

It is well, the spirit said. *The Heart of the Land has been revealed. Take it.*

Rollan turned and saw that a warm glow was emanating from the hole in the side of the gila monster structure. Carefully he put his hand in, and he felt the bumpy surface of the rock—and more. Grasping it with his fingers, he pulled it out. The others gathered closer to see. In his hand, the scales covering the rock started to crumble like a burned crust, and fell away to show the revealed Heart of the Land, which glowed softly, a rounded chunk of amber stone with something dark trapped in its center. It had been carved and smoothed into the shape of a gila monster, tightly curled, its stubby tail tucked under its chin. And it was set on a chain—an amulet.

Rollan could feel it pulsing with power and possibility.

The spirit of the hero nodded, as if she could read his mind. *Anyone wielding the Heart can be as the gila monster*, she said.

Rollan looked up at her. Kikimi's eyes were oddly piercing, as if she were looking at him from across many, many years. "Be as ... how?" he asked.

It is called the Heart of the Land for a reason, Kikimi said. *It was our two hearts, made into one. Unified.* The spirit cast a mournful glance at the face of the lizard that surrounded them.

And it offers great power, but power can be misused. The spirit turned, as if she was looking past them, toward the shore of the lake. Then she turned back. *Others are seeking the Heart. They will try to take it from you.*

As she spoke, the ground started trembling again. Little rags of mist started tearing from Kikimi's shape and whirling away. Her image faded. *Beware!* her hollow voice said, echoing in Rollan's head as she disappeared. *The Heart will give great power to whoever wields it, even if they are not Marked. You must not let the Heart fall into wicked hands!*

And then every wisp of mist was gone.

Rollan looked away and saw the other three Greencloaks staring at him.

Then they looked down at the amulet in Rollan's palm. It still glowed softly with its own light. The pattern on the sculpture that surrounded them had faded. It was as if they had been in a room separate from the outer world; all of a sudden, sounds from outside penetrated the room,

and a breeze curled around their feet. Rollan looked out to see the clouds breaking up and the surface of the lake glinting where it was touched by beams of sunlight.

And ... something else.

Quickly Rollan stepped out of the embracing circle of the gila monster sculpture and called Essix from passive state. She flashed out, catching the wind with her wings and soaring from the top of the island. Closing his eyes, Rollan looked at what she saw.

Black-clad figures had gathered on the shore of the lake.

Anka and Worthy stood on the sand bridge that led to the island. They were fighting, but they were being driven back, step by step.

The Oathbound army had arrived.



21

THE HAMMER

“**T**HEY’RE HERE,” ROLLAN SAID, WITH A QUICK GLANCE at Meilin.

She nodded, immediately understanding. The Heart of the Land had been revealed, and now the Oathbound would try to take it, and then arrest the Greencloaks.

“Let’s go!” Abeke said. She headed for the edge of the island, where they could start climbing to the beach, far below. Meilin and the others followed.

Conor went first, resolutely not looking down. Then Abeke, and then Rollan, who was busy putting the revealed Heart into his pocket, and then Meilin was sliding on her stomach over the edge of the cliff, feeling for the first foothold with her boot.

She felt the need to hurry making her nerves jangle, but every step had to be carefully considered. She could hear faint shouts from the Oathbound as they rallied on the lakeshore.

Battle was awaiting them. They would need every weapon at their disposal.

“Rollan!” she called over her shoulder. Glancing down, she saw him pause and look up at her, then nod to show that he was listening. “How can we use the amulet in the fight?”

Rollan started climbing down again, his gaze on the stone cliff two inches from his nose. “I’m not sure,” he panted. His voice sounded hoarse. “Kikimi—the spirit—she said that the Heart can make the

wielder *as the gila monster*. I think gila monsters have a venomous bite. But there are stories.... ” He paused while climbing over a tricky spot. “Be careful here,” he said. “The rock’s a little slippery.”

Carefully, Meilin continued. Climbing down was definitely harder than climbing up. At least they weren’t doing it in the middle of a howling thunderstorm. “Stories about the gila monster?” she prompted.

“Myths, really,” Rollan called up to her. “They’re sacred to some of the people who live in the west of Amaya. The gila monsters are burrowers. But,” he added, sounding doubtful, “I don’t think they are very powerful. They’re kind of slow, and they like to stay hidden. The Heart might not be able to help us much.”

Well, then, they wouldn’t count on any help from the Heart. They were on their own. Meilin tried to ignore the dread gathering in her chest. There were hundreds of Oathbound waiting for them on the lakeshore. They’d been in some tough fights before, but they’d *never* faced odds this terrible. What if the Oathbound army’s orders were to kill them instead of arresting them? They might not get out of this alive.

Below her, Abeke had reached the pebbly beach; a moment later, Conor joined her and they both called forth their spirit animals. Uraza bounded from the passive state with a snarl. Briggan raised his head and howled out a challenge to the Oathbound on the lakeshore. Essix swooped lower as Rollan jumped down to the beach, his heavy brown cloak swirling behind him. The falcon settled on his shoulder, her wings half open, ready to launch herself into flight as soon as Rollan gave the word. Abeke was busy stringing her bow and unwrapping the piece of leather that had protected the arrows in her quiver from the rain.

Meilin jumped down beside them and called Jhi from passive state. The panda yawned and then settled on her haunches, as if waiting to see what was going to happen. The presence of Jhi made Meilin feel suddenly stronger and more steady.

From the direction of the lakeshore came the sounds of shouted orders. The Oathbound had seen them reach the base of the cliff. Halfway along the bridge of sand, Worthy was fighting alone to keep a line of Oathbound attackers from crossing to the island. Fortunately, because the sand bridge was so narrow, he only had to face one attacker

at a time. He was so fiercely fast and lithe from his black panther traits that he didn't even need any weapons, just his retractable claws. Behind him crouched the faint outline that was Anka. Hiding, not fighting.

The man coming for Worthy had a long spear. Worthy leaped back to avoid a thrust, and as his feet hit the sand it quivered and turned to liquid. He started sinking. Meilin heard the Redcloak yowl as he sank up to his knees. It had turned to quicksand—just as Worthy had feared!

The army of Oathbound soldiers—over a hundred, Meilin guessed—were massed on the beach, ready to converge on the Greencloaks once they fought their way across the bridge and reached the lakeshore.

“We are in big trouble,” Rollan said, pulling out his knife.

“Six against a hundred or more,” Abeke added. Gripping her bow, she bounced on the balls of her feet, looking ready to leap into action. “And they've got at least three Marked warriors with them.”

Rollan squinted, using his keen sight to scan the enemy. “Yep. Wikam the Just with his vulture, and the spider guy. And an Amayan ... ” He shook his head. “His animal is something that flies really, really fast. I can't get a good look at it.”

Meilin stepped quickly to Rollan's side. “If we're captured, can you give Essix the Heart so she can escape with it?”

He jerked out a quick nod, then rubbed his throat as if it hurt.

“Listen,” Meilin said. Unsheathing her sword, she glanced around at her friends and their spirit animals. “We don't have to defeat them. We just have to fight through and escape. All right?”

“We're ready,” Conor said, resting a hand on Briggan's head. The wolf panted, eager for battle.

Rollan nodded, and Abeke gave a neat salute with her bow. “Ready!”

“For the Greencloaks!” Meilin shouted, her heart pounding. “Let's go!”

She led the way, racing over the sand bridge. By the time she passed Anka and reached Worthy, he was up to his waist in the quicksand, bleeding from a wound in his side but still fighting furiously. With one swift stroke of her sword she dealt with the spearman who'd been poking at Worthy. He tumbled, shrieking, into the icy lake water.

A blur of gold and black, and Uraza bounded past. Abeke fired an arrow as she leaped, followed closely by Briggan and Conor, whose ax whirled above his head.

Meilin yelled in the direction she'd last seen Anka. "Help them!"

As she moved, Anka revealed herself, sand colored. She nodded, looking grim and a little scared, then went after the other Greencloaks.

There was a ripple down the line of Oathbound on the sand bridge, as the attackers turned to defenders, and their warlike shouts turned to cries of fear.

Quickly sheathing her sword, Meilin found firm footing. Behind the mask, she could see Worthy's eyes, wide and frightened.

"I'm very glad to see you at this particular moment," he gasped.

Seizing his hands, Meilin pulled with all her strength. But he was stuck, sinking deeper into the sucking sand. Ahead, she could hear the sound of Uraza's snarls, and screams and splashes as Abeke and Conor, with Anka's help, battled their way through the line of Oathbound on the sand bridge. But there were still way too many Oathbound, led by Wikam, waiting for them on the shore.

Panting, Meilin kept pulling at Worthy's hands, but he was already up to his chest. "Stop struggling!" she yelled at him. "You're only making it worse!"

Then, from behind her came a deep roar—a quick glance over her shoulder showed Jhi, her heavy body starting to sink. The panda lurched, and the quicksand flowed over her paws.

"Oh *no*," Meilin panted. Releasing Worthy's hands—he yowled in terror—she turned to call Jhi back into passive state; the panda went with a mournful roll of her dark eyes.

To her dismay, Rollan wasn't coming to help. He stood at the beginning of the sand bridge, and his lips were moving as if he was talking to himself. His long knife was lowered.

"Rollan!" she yelled. They needed him to fight!

He nodded, looking distracted. "Coming!" he shouted, but he didn't move.

Behind her, Worthy was babbling. "I'm sorry I ever thought you were scary, Meilin, just get me out of here, it's—gah! I'm sinking! I promise

I'll do anything you—”

Meilin turned back to face him. “Shut up, Worthy,” she muttered. He was up to his armpits now, his chin raised, keeping his mouth above the waves that lapped over the sand bridge. Grabbing his hands, she pulled.

Then, to her horror, the sand under her feet suddenly turned to liquid and she started to sink. In a blink, she was ankle deep in the sand. She tried to pull one foot out, and the other sank deeper.

“We are *so doooooomed*,” she heard Worthy moan.

A second later, and she was trapped up to her knees. Twisting her body, she saw that Rollan had finally stepped onto the sand bridge. He looked like he was coming to help.

“Stay there!” she yelled frantically. “If you try to help us, you’ll get trapped, too!”

But he kept coming, striding over the quivering sand. As he came, he raised his fist—he was holding the Heart amulet, and its amber glow leaked between his fingers.

Meilin felt a grinding thunder rumbling up from below. All around, the lake’s waves churned, white with foam.

“Hold on!” Rollan shouted at her. Taking another step, he brought the hand holding the Heart down like a hammer. A deep boom rolled out from it, and with a whoosh, the quicksand holding Meilin and Worthy spat them out like a couple of melon seeds. Meilin stumbled to her knees, panting. Worthy lay on his stomach, trembling. “Ground,” he mumbled, talking to the sand bridge, “if my arms were long enough, I would hug you right now.” He got shakily to his feet. Blood was streaming from a cut over his ribs.

Without stopping, Rollan strode past them. “Get down!” he shouted to Abeke and Conor, and as they flattened themselves he brought the hammer down again. Meilin clung to the sand bridge as it writhed like a snake in an earthquake. Worthy wobbled and went to his knees behind her. All along the heaving bridge, the Oathbound were tossed into the lake, shrieking, throwing away their heavy weapons so they could swim.

Rollan whirled. Catching Meilin’s eye, he grinned wildly, his hair tousled, his brown cloak whipping around him. “Heart of the *Land*,

Meilin!” he shouted, and raised the glowing amulet in his clenched fist.
“We should have realized—the gila monster has the power of the earth!”



BLOOD AND ARROWS

THE BRIDGE-QUAKE HAD KNOCKED ALL THE Oathbound into the lake. Abeke climbed to her feet, holding her bow well above the water so the string wouldn't get wet. Uraza bounded ahead of her. After a quick glance to see Conor and Briggan just a pace behind her, Abeke followed on light feet. Farther back was the blur that was Anka, and Meilin, her sword glinting in the light. Worthy was taking giant pantherlike leaps, his red cloak swirling behind him, and then came Rollan with Essix swooping low over his head, shrieking out a challenge.

Shaking back her braids, Abeke echoed that cry. "For the Greencloaks!" she shouted.

"For the Greencloaks!" her friends joined in.

"And the Redcloaks!" Worthy yowled.

Her teeth bared with excitement, Abeke looked ahead as she raced along the narrow bridge. On the shore awaited a wall of Oathbound soldiers, all dressed in black uniforms with brass armor protecting their necks and their lower arms. Farther back she saw Wikam the Just, taller than all the others, issuing orders. The huge vulture was hunched on his shoulder.

Wikam, who wanted to unjustly arrest the Greencloaks, throw them into a prison, and condemn them to death—for something they hadn't done!

He would be her target.

Snarling, Uraza reached the shore first, and the Oathbound soldiers fell back before her, giving Abeke room to begin her attack. As the other Greencloaks swarmed off the sand bridge, Abeke and Uraza cut sideways, using their leopard-given stealthiness to dodge a spear thrust. Another leap, and Abeke was past two more Oathbound swordsmen, drawing an arrow from her quiver and trying to spot Wikam amid the whirl of fighting. Uraza crouched beside her, ready to pounce. From the lakeshore by the sand bridge came the sound of clashing weapons, shouted orders, and then Briggan's howl as he entered the fray.

Wikam was pointing out where his soldiers should strike next, surrounded by a personal guard of six burly warriors, all bearing sharp-pointed pikes that kept him clear of the battle. His vulture launched itself from his shoulder, flapping its wings to gain height.

Uraza snarled, keeping the attacking Oathbound at bay while Abeke drew back her bowstring, sighting down the arrow at her target.

At that very moment, Wikam turned, and they locked eyes across a mass of Oathbound who were charging into the fight.

You're mine, Abeke thought fiercely. She felt the rightness of the shot and released the arrow. It flashed across the space separating her from Wikam, flying straight and true toward his heart.

Abeke had time to feel a moment of exultation—*got you!*—when a huge, black-feathered shape swooped down and snatched the arrow out of the air just before it reached its target. The bird flapped upward, croaking in triumph, the arrow clutched in its bony talons. Wikam's vulture!

Immediately Abeke reached for another arrow, nocked it, and fired. Seeing it coming, Wikam grabbed one of his own soldiers, pulling the man in front of him. The arrow plunged into the man's chest. Blood splattered across Wikam's face. Almost carelessly, he tossed the man aside like a cracked shield. Abeke was ready with another arrow, but it was too late. The Oathbound guards had closed in around Wikam, making him impossible to reach.

She heard Wikam scream an order. A troop of ten Oathbound split off from the main battle. Bearing swords and spears, they advanced on Abeke. Uraza snarled, and ten *more* warriors came after her.

Backing away, Abeke trained an arrow on one, and then another of the Oathbound.

But she only had seven arrows left.

It wouldn't be enough.



BLOOD AND AX BLADES

WHEN ABEKE AND URAZA WENT LEFT, CONOR AND Briggan cut their way into the middle of Wikam's fighters. Conor's wolflike strength and speed meant none of the Oathbound could match him, and Briggan at his back meant they couldn't attack him from behind.

With a yell, Conor whirled his ax over his head, clearing a space around himself and Briggan. One big Oathbound warrior with a huge double-bladed ax stepped over a wounded comrade, right into the opening. He had braided both his fiery red hair and his long beard. The man roared out a challenge. "Come to me, Greencloak!" he shouted. "And learn how to die!" And with heavily muscled arms, he strode forward, swinging the ax, trying to chop Conor in half.

Conor felt the breeze of its passing as he ducked out of the way.

With a frustrated shout, the warrior lifted the ax high above his head and brought it down like an executioner, aiming for Conor's neck. Conor leaped aside, and the ax thudded into the stony ground.

Too close, Conor thought. The man was big, but he was fast, too. Conor had to end this.

Another dodge and a roll, and Conor got inside the warrior's guard. Reversing his grip on his weapon, Conor smashed the butt of his ax under the warrior's bearded chin.

But the blow just seemed to make him angier. Roaring with pain and outrage, the warrior went berserk, his ax hacking wildly through the air.

Conor couldn't fight a madman. "Let's go!" he shouted to Briggan, and they retreated, pursued by five Oathbound and the bearded warrior.



BLOOD AND AMULET

ROLLAN SET FOOT ON THE LAKESHORE JUST AS WORTHY, yowling out a challenge, landed crouched in the middle of a group of Oathbound. They converged on him, and then there was a sort of explosion as Worthy turned into a snarling, whirling weapon of destruction. Screaming black-clad figures went flying in every direction.

Off to the side, Abeke was taking aim at something with her bow, and Meilin had drawn her sword while calling Jhi out of passive state. Conor was being chased by a pack of Oathbound, with Briggan protecting his back. Even Anka was using her new fighting skills to attack Oathbound seemingly out of nowhere.

In Rollan's hand, the Heart of the Land burned hot like stone that had been baking under a desert sun. Frantically, he racked his brain trying to remember the stories he'd heard about the legendary gila monster. The amulet was clearly powerful. If he could figure out how to use it, they might be able to defeat the Oathbound army.

Something green and black whizzed past his head, and he flinched away. An arrow?

No—it swooped around, chirping angrily, and darted back toward him. A hummingbird! Not too much of a threat, he thought. It was only a tiny bird. It was the spirit animal of the Marked Amayan Oathbound, who raced toward Rollan brandishing a rapier—a thin sword with a wickedly sharp point. Still holding up the Heart, Rollan ripped the long

knife from his belt in time to block the Marked Oathbound's attack. The hummingbird flashed past his face again, distracting him, and he barely managed to evade the next thrust. He felt a thin line of pain along his cheekbone. Shaking his head, a few drops of blood flew out. Had the bird cut him? Then the Oathbound struck again, and the rapier slid past Rollan's ribs, ripping a hole in both of his cloaks. At the same moment, the hummingbird darted straight toward his face. It was aiming its sharp beak at his eyes—it was trying to blind him!

Seeing Rollan in trouble, Essix dove in, her talons reaching for the hummingbird, but it was too swift, easily evading her and flashing in for another attack.

Rollan threw up his arm to protect his eyes from the hummingbird's sharp beak.

Then something hit him hard from the side and he was slammed to the ground. As he landed, the Heart of the Land amulet popped out of his hand and went tumbling among the stones that littered the lakeshore. Rollan struggled against the heavy weight that had hit him—an Oathbound twice his size with hugely muscled arms.

Rollan slashed at her with his long knife, but the edge of the blade hit her brass collar. She responded by jerking him to his feet and wrapping one of her arms around his neck.

“Wikam's orders!” shouted the Oathbound to the Marked Amayan as Rollan struggled to breathe. His feet weren't even touching the ground! “Get the amulet!” she screamed.

The Marked Oathbound went to his knees, the hummingbird circling his head. To his dismay, Rollan saw him pick up the Heart—then came a blur of feathers, and Essix swooped down to snatch it from his fingers, soaring into the sky with the Heart clutched in her talons.

Rollan choked out a yell of triumph, and the Oathbound woman squeezed harder, cutting off his air. He'd already been choked once today—this was really too much! Black spots formed before his eyes, and he clawed at the burly arm that was wrapped around his throat. He was starting to see why wearing neck armor might be a good idea.

Then he heard a grunt and the pressure on his throat let up. As he went to his knees, gasping for breath, the Oathbound crashed to the

ground beside him, unconscious. He looked up to see Anka fading into the background.

“Thanks!” Rollan rasped.

He saw what looked like a faint grin cross her face, and then she disappeared again.

He climbed to his feet, rubbing the new bruises on his neck, trying to spot Essix—and the Heart—but what he saw made his own heart sink.

Twenty feet away, Meilin had been separated from Jhi and was surrounded by Oathbound. She was a whirlwind of attacks, all efficiency and focus. Her movements were a blur—a chop at one Oathbound’s neck, a blow aimed at another’s ribs, followed by a precise strike at that particular place where boys really don’t want to be hit.

But when that Oathbound fell at her feet, writhing in pain, another leaped forward to take his place. There were too many of them!

Worthy was surrounded, too. The Redcloak was bleeding from wounds on both arms, a leg, and his chest, and every time he whirled to rip at an Oathbound attacker with his claws, droplets of his own blood sprayed around him. His mask had been hacked in half, revealing one catlike eye and a snarling mouth. He was fierce, but his movements were slowing.

Conor was outnumbered, too, though he had used his ax and wolf-given speed to clear an area around him. Abeke had run out of arrows and was using her bow as a staff as she fought an Oathbound armed with a spear.

“Essix!” Rollan shouted desperately, searching the sky. Then he glimpsed the falcon from the corner of his eye. With Wikam’s vulture on her tail, she dove toward him, holding the Heart in her talons. Rollan reached to meet her, and his fingers closed around the amulet. The vulture, a moment behind, raked its claws across Rollan’s hand, trying to get him to drop the stone, but he held on, ignoring the flash of pain over his knuckles.

The vulture gave a guttural hiss and banked awkwardly, coming around for another attack.

As Rollan ducked, he saw that Wikam had ordered another group of Oathbound to form up for an attack—at least twenty of them. Worthy

and Meilin would be overwhelmed; Conor and Abeke would not be able to help.

Rollan slashed at the diving vulture with his long knife and then tried the same move that had cleared the Oathbound from the sand bridge, bringing down his hand holding the Heart like a hammer. Thunder rolled out, and under the Heart's power the land bucked and heaved. The attacking Oathbound were flung onto their knees. But so were his friends. As the earthquake passed, they all jumped to their feet again, picked up the weapons they'd dropped, and the fight resumed.

"All right, that didn't work," Rollan muttered to himself. "Gila monster." He backed away as two Oathbound came at him with swords drawn. "Lizard," he chanted frantically. "Uh ... burrows in the ground." He gripped the Heart. "Burrower!" he shouted.

The group of Oathbound had almost reached the spot where Meilin and Worthy were now fighting back-to-back.

Swooping forward with the speed of one of Essix's dives, Rollan punched the fist holding the amulet toward the Oathbound attackers. He felt power roll out, and with a rumble and a heave of dirt, a sinkhole opened right under the Oathbounds' feet. All twenty of them tumbled down, shrieking. Their cries grew louder as Rollan gestured again and the dirt flowed back, covering them up to their necks.

"Hah!" he yelled.

Worthy echoed him, yowling with glee.

Meilin connected a blow with an opponent's head and then spun around, checking for attackers, but she'd dealt with all of them. Rollan's eyes met hers; she gave a nod of approval.

And then she looked past him, and her eyes went wide with dismay.

Whirling, Rollan saw what she was looking at.

Wikam had been holding even more Oathbound in reserve. A large group of archers aimed their powerful longbows. They had nocked their heavy arrows, tipped with razor-sharp barbs. At Wikam's shouted command, the archers drew back their bowstrings.

Rollan's heart froze. The Oathbound leader was not trying to capture them anymore. This wasn't about justice. His archers were aiming to kill.

"Get down!" Rollan heard Abeke scream.

But it was too late.

The archers fired. A storm of arrows streaked through the air.

Aimed at the Greencloaks' hearts.



AS THE OATHBOUND ARCHERS RELEASED THEIR arrows, Meilin knew she was about to die. She and her best friends would be struck by enough arrows to kill them instantly. Instinctively, she looked for Rollan, expecting to see his face pale with fright as he faced death.

But instead, his eyes were bright as he held up the glowing Heart of the Land. “Gila monster!” he was shouting. “Armor!”

The arrows, black and deadly, hissed through the air. They were mere inches away as Rollan’s hand went out in a blocking gesture, and every single arrow suddenly stopped, hung in the air for a second, and then fell to the ground with a clatter.

“Rollan, I think I love you ...” was Worthy’s breathless comment.

“Ooh, arrows!” Abeke exclaimed. She started gathering them up, stuffing as many as she could into her quiver.

“Another gila monster trait,” Rollan said, grinning. “They’re associated with armor. The other one that I can think of is their venomous bite.” He cocked his head. “Think I can get close enough to Wikam to bite him?”

Meilin glanced in that direction. Her heart dropped. “No,” she said briefly, and raised her sword, ready to fight. Behind her, Jhi gave a mournful roar.

The Oathbound archers had set down their bows and had drawn swords. A shrieked order from Wikam, and they charged toward the five

Greencloaks and Worthy.

“Time for another sinkhole!” Rollan said, raising the Heart of the Land.

But the Oathbound were ready for that.

As Rollan punched his fist, holding the Heart toward the mass of fighters, they parted, racing around the sinkhole that opened in the ground. Another wave of attackers followed.

A moment later, Meilin and her allies were surrounded by a thicket of gleaming swords.

“Surrender!” screamed Wikam, who had followed his fighters. They were opening up a way for him to get to the Greencloaks. His vulture swooped low, then landed on his shoulder, its ugly face looking smug with victory.

Meilin saw Worthy’s shoulders slump, and Abeke lowered her bow. A glance at Rollan, and he shook his head, eyes wide. The Heart couldn’t save them now.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Anka said from beside her. “I can’t hide us when we’re right in front of them.”

“Throw down your weapons, renegade Greencloaks,” Wikam ordered, “and put your spirit animals into passive state!”

Meilin saw Rollan glance up, looking for Essix—she could escape with the Heart.

“If I see that falcon come near the amulet,” Wikam shouted, “I will have it shot from the air!”

Rollan gulped and lowered his fist. The Heart of the Land’s glow was fading.

Slowly, Meilin straightened. The excitement of battle drained from her muscles, leaving her shaking. It was over. They couldn’t resist without being killed. She called Jhi, and the panda went into the passive state; Abeke and Conor had done the same with Uraza and Briggan. Essix was nowhere to be seen.

“Lay down your weapons!” Wikam ordered. Tall and gaunt, he stood with arms crossed, just behind the first row of Oathbound fighters, who still had their swords drawn. “It is time for you to face the justice you deserve.”

Meilin knew that justice was exactly what they *wouldn't* get from Wikam.

All he would offer them was death.

Conor was bending to set his ax on the ground when suddenly Worthy ripped off the remains of his mask and let out a sound that was part snarl, part wowl, and fiercely triumphant. "*Redcloaks!*" he shouted. "To me!"

Meilin stared in astonishment as a group of twelve red-cloaked, mask-wearing fighters burst from the forest near the lake and raced across the pebbly shoreline toward them.

Seeing the new threat, Wikam whirled and started shrieking orders to his Oathbound. Half stayed to guard the Greencloaks; the other half, at least forty fighters, split off to meet the newcomers.

The Redcloaks were outnumbered three to one, but each of them had the power, speed, and strength of the spirit animals they were once bonded with. It was an even fight ... almost.

"Now is our chance to escape!" Worthy shouted.

Meilin nodded; the others were already raising their weapons again. She saw Worthy exchange a kind of salute with the leader of the Redcloaks—who wore a white mask in the shape of a ram's face.

Worthy, she realized, had *known* the Redcloak fighters had been coming to help them!

No sense in wasting this opportunity.

"Let's go!" Meilin shouted, and with a lightning-fast move, she disarmed the nearest Oathbound fighter, seizing her sword for herself. A sweeping strike with that sword, and she was through the line of guards; the others followed. In the distance she heard a howl of outrage as Wikam realized the Greencloaks were getting away. A group of Oathbound broke off from those fighting the Redcloaks and started in pursuit. The Redcloaks, using their superhuman speed, raced to block them.

"Shouldn't we help?" Abeke called, looking back over her shoulder. She had one of the Oathbound arrows in her hand and looked ready to nock it and let it fly.

"Stead and the others are giving us time to escape!" Worthy panted. He pointed toward the forest path.

“Wait!” Rollan shouted, and stumbled to a halt. The others gathered around him, panting. “They’ll know exactly where we’ve gone, and we can’t outrun them for long. The vulture will track us.”

Down the beach, the Redcloaks were fighting wildly, holding back the mass of black-clad Oathbound.

“We have to go!” Worthy yowled frantically.

“We’d better run,” Meilin agreed.

“No,” Rollan said briefly. “I just realized what it means that gila monsters are burrowers.” He raised his hand—still holding the Heart of the Land. It glowed brightly again. “Tunnel!” he shouted.

With a rumble, the pebbles at their feet shifted; they all jumped back as a hole in the ground opened, just big enough to crawl into.

Rollan bent to peer into it. “It’s a tunnel, all right.” Crumbles of dirt fell from around the opening. It didn’t look very stable.

“You go first,” Worthy said, looking doubtful.

Rolling his eyes, Rollan crawled in. His voice drifted back to them. “It’s opening up ahead of me. It’s leading away! Come on!”

One by one, they followed, keeping their spirit animals in passive state. Meilin went last. As she crawled into the hole, following Worthy, the dirt caved in behind her. She felt a moment of panic—they’d be trapped!—when she realized that the tunnel was closing behind them, hiding where they had gone.

She crawled for what seemed like a long, long time in utter blackness.

“I hate this,” she heard Worthy mutter.

She didn’t like it much, either, but there was no way the Oathbound could track them underground. This was their best chance to escape.

“It’s really dark in here,” came Worthy’s complaining voice. Then Meilin heard him mutter, “*Shut up, Worthy.*”

She had been about to say the same thing. Instead she reached forward in the dark until she felt Worthy’s ankle. She gave it a reassuring pat. “It’s all right,” she said softly. “We’re all scared.”

“Even you?” he whispered.

“Even me,” she said.

“Oh,” she heard him say. And then, even more quietly, “Thanks, Meilin.”

Her knees were starting to get sore, and she knew she was covered with dirt. She had dirt in her hair and under her fingernails. She really hated being dirty.

Something long and soft—a furry rope?—brushed her face, and she flinched back. The tunnel fell in behind her, forcing her to go on.

The furry rope touched her cheek again, and she reached up quickly, grabbed it, and pulled hard.

“Owww!” Worthy yowled, from just ahead of her.

Quickly she let go of the furry rope. Wait. Was it a—? Did Worthy have a—?

There was a sudden muffled shout from ahead, and a burst of light blinded her.



WORTHY

WITH A HEAVE, THE GROUND SPAT THEM ALL OUT. ALL six of them—the four Greencloak kids, Anka, and Worthy—lay on the forest floor, panting. The tunnel had disappeared. There was no sound of fighting. There was no path.

Worthy knew he should get up, but he felt so comfortable, just lying there. Above, pine branches swayed quietly in a light breeze. So peaceful. His eyes dropped closed.

Around him, the others were sitting up.

“I think we’re clear,” he heard Meilin’s voice say.

“I’ll ask Uraza to check our tail,” Abeke said. “Our trail, I mean.”

Worthy heard other sounds, and then he felt prickly, as if he was being watched. He opened his eyes to see Meilin standing at his feet, looking down at him. The panda loomed behind her.

Nearby stood Abeke, holding her bow, and Rollan, with Essix on his shoulder. Next to them was Conor, Briggan panting at his side. Anka was there, too, a blur of forest green.

For some reason the four Greencloaks and Anka were all smiling at him.

Worthy sat up, then climbed wearily to his feet. He was so tired—even his bones hurt. He glanced down at his arm.

There was a slash in his sleeve. A wound! “Gah!” he exclaimed. “Blood!” There was blood on his pants, too, and on his shirt. A second

later, he felt the pain from four different wounds hit him at once.

With a yowl, he flopped back onto the ground. "I'm dying!" he moaned. "Farewell. Think kindly of me when I'm gone."

Meilin crouched beside him. "Worthy."

He gazed pitifully up at her. "What?" he said weakly.

"These are flesh wounds," Meilin said.

He blinked. "So I'm not dying?"

"No, you're not dying." He started to sit up, but she put a gentle hand on his shoulder and held him down. "You are hurt, though. Stay there."

"What you need," Rollan said, "is some panda spit."

"Yes," Meilin agreed. "Jhi can help."

Worthy lay still as the big panda lumbered over to him. Her pink tongue licked the slash on his arm, then the cut over his ribs, and then the two other wounds. A feeling of peace settled over him. The stinging pain from his injuries faded away. "Panda spit," he murmured. "I see what you mean."

Now he really didn't feel like getting up.

"Just rest," he heard Meilin say.

No problem. Worthy lay there listening to the Greencloaks tell Anka what had happened up on the Heart of the Land island while he and the chameleon woman had fought together on the sand bridge. Something about a spirit and a warning, and a gila monster.

"It's quite a ... um ... tale," he heard Rollan say.

Wearily, Worthy let their words wash over him. In a minute he would tell them what he knew about the second gift to the Greencloaks. Or, rather, what he'd guessed. His own family had once possessed an ancestral sword. It had been modeled after a famous sword from Euran history.

Something about a claw.

Eurans had always told stories about a legendary black wildcat. Long ago, such a wildcat had roamed the country with his human partner. The tales told of a great sword that the two used to defend their home.

The Wildcat's Claw.

This gift probably had great powers, just like the Heart of the Land, but it had been hidden, too. And nobody knew exactly what its powers

had been.

Devin Trunswick's family sword had just been a replica of that great sword, but if there was a record of the real gift, it was likely somewhere in Trunswick.

He, Worthy, would lead them to it.

The Greencloaks were still talking.

"You know," Conor was saying, "Princess Song was on our side before. I think we should try getting a message to her."

"Telling her what?" Worthy heard Meilin ask.

"We might be able to convince her about the Fakecloaks," Conor answered.

Typical, Worthy thought to himself. Conor always thought the best of people. He wondered if Conor thought the best of *him* now. Had he proven himself enough? Would the Greencloaks let him stay with them?

"No," he heard Anka say. "We can't risk contacting anyone. We have to keep going. We have to find the other gifts."

"And we don't even know where to start," Meilin said.

Worthy smiled, knowing they would trust him even more, once he'd helped them with that. "So ... " he interrupted, opening his eyes. "Was I a hero? During the fight with the Oathbound?"

The five of them broke off their conversation and glanced over at him.

He sat up.

Did the Greencloaks approve of him? Did they truly accept him? He knew his expression was giving away how desperately he hoped they did, so he groped in the pocket of his cloak for the extra mask that every Redcloak carried at all times. Carefully, he tied it over his face, concealing his features.

But he couldn't conceal what he knew, not any longer. "We'll have to look for the sword next. The Wildcat's Claw, wielded by a legendary hero of Eura." He gulped. "When I ... when I went over to the Conquerors, I let Zerif bond me to the black panther." He looked up, meeting Conor's eyes. "I'm really, *really* sorry about that. I wanted ... " He shrugged. "I wanted to be a hero."

All four of the Greencloaks looked down at him. Meilin's eyebrows were raised. A corner of Rollan's mouth quirked up.

“You definitely were a hero in the battle against the Oathbound,”
Conor answered at last. Even Briggan looked like he was smiling.

“We are very glad to have you with us,” Abeke added.

Worthy let their approval sink in for a moment. Then, with a weary sigh, he climbed stiffly to his feet.

They were all grinning widely at him.

He smiled back at them. He really was part of the team. He’d never been happier. Then, to his horror, he felt his long, furry secret uncurl from behind his red cloak.

Rollan gave a shout of laughter.

Oh *no*! Worthy buried his masked face in his hands.

“Wait, what?” he heard Anka’s sharp voice exclaim. “Worthy has a *tail*?”

Sarah Prineas is the author of *The Magic Thief*, *Winterling*, and *Ash & Bramble* series. She lives in Iowa with her mad-scientist husband, two kids, two dogs, two cats, chickens, and a bunch of goats.

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BOOK SIX

THE WILDCAT'S CLAW

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A sneak peek of the next



Book Six

The Wildcat's Claw

By Varian Johnson



LENORI

LENORI PACED HER CRAMPED QUARTERS—WHICH WERE little more than a small, single holding cell with meager wood furnishings. She hadn't had contact with Olvan, or any other Greencloaks, since being imprisoned. Most of the others had been captured and returned to Greenhaven Castle, where they would be held for trial, but she and Olvan remained in the Citadel.

Olvan.

He'd been struck by a stone viper's fangs, and most of his body was turned to stone. Thanks to her rainbow ibis, Myriam, Lenori could sense his presence. He was in pain, but alive, though she didn't know for how long.

She didn't know how long any of them had.

The Second Devourer War had taken a heavy toll on all of the nations, and the Wurm's destructive reign of terror only amplified people's fears. The Greencloaks had saved the world, but it had come at a great price. Despite their best efforts, many people had suffered.

Zerif, under the Wurm's control, had used his immense powers to ravage the world. But these battles weren't just fought in far-off lands like Stetriol or Arctica. There was bloodshed in every village. Neighbor against neighbor. Brother against brother. Mother against daughter. Father against son.

The Greencloaks themselves had inflicted some of the worst damage.

Zerif, armed with the Wyrms' parasites, had taken control of most of their order, and had then turned them loose to wreak havoc in every corner of every land. There was no village, no militia, and no army that could prevail against a legion of Greencloaks when they partnered with their spirit animals. With their true, uninhibited powers now unleashed, the Greencloaks had shown the world just how powerful they'd become.

People were afraid of them. They were angry. They were distrustful. And Lenori couldn't fault any of them for feeling that way.

She and Olvan thought that by coming here to meet with the leaders of the nations, they would be able to soothe any doubts and remind the world that the Greencloaks only wanted to preserve peace. They had even brought along the Four Heroes of Erdas—each from a different nation, but united in their oath to serve and protect all lands. But thanks to traitors within their midst, the Emperor of Zhong had fallen, and the real Greencloaks were left to take the blame.

Lenori pressed her ear against the door to make sure that no one was nearby, but heard only a quiet dripping from the Citadel's leaking roof. She released Myriam from passive state. The ibis strutted around, proudly displaying her rainbow feathers and shaking her long, thin legs.

"No time for showing off, Myriam," Lenori said. "We must find our young friends."

She sat down on the stone floor and closed her eyes. She pushed the cold of the room, the fear of her imprisonment, and worry for her fellow Greencloaks from her mind. Her pulse slowed and her body relaxed. It was just her, Myriam, and Erdas, united as one.

A hazy image floated before her. She concentrated, trying to sharpen its edges. Trying to bring it into focus. It was a ship, cutting across the ocean. Squeezing her eyes tighter, she saw the Four Heroes huddled in a small room. No—not four. There were six of them. They had been tested recently—she could see the weariness of their faces—but they exuded a sense of accomplishment. Her mind centered itself on Rollan. Her gaze fell to the thin leather strap around his neck.

The Heart of the Land. He had revealed it!

She heard something in the distance. Echoes? Footsteps?

Was there danger on the boat? A trap waiting to be sprung?

She shook her head. Those sounds weren't coming from the ship. Someone was approaching her room.

She blinked, and her mind returned to her cell. She looked at the ibis, sitting calmly beside her. "Myriam, back to me. I don't want them to know that you've been loose."

The rainbow ibis disappeared just as the heavy wooden door swung open. Two Oathbound warriors, both dressed in black, entered the room. She recognized the one with the short blond hair. Sure enough, the woman's brown stone viper flashed into view, curling around her large arm. Brunhild the Merry. She was the one who'd poisoned Olvan.

The other warrior was new to Lenori. Like Brunhild, this woman wore a black uniform with brass neck and wrist collars, but the woman also sported shiny, gaudy rings on most of her fingers. Her long brown hair was twisted into an intricate braid that trailed over her shoulder, like an embroidered rope hanging from a curtain.

The unknown woman snapped her fingers, and another warrior entered the room, carrying a tray full of breads, dates, and cheeses. Lenori willed her stomach to remain silent. It was the first food she'd seen in two days.

The warrior placed the tray before Lenori, then left the room. The woman with the long braid took a step forward. "Don't you want to eat?"

Lenori pretended that the food wasn't there. "No, I want to be set free."

The braided woman shook her head. "Don't ask for the impossible," she said. "Go on, take a bite. Eat it all. Gorge yourself." She grinned. "I promise it isn't laced with stone viper venom."

Lenori instead curled her hands into her lap. "What do you want from me?"

"We know why your young friends were in Amaya," the Oathbound woman said, whipping her ponytail over her shoulder and behind her back. She began to pace, her boots echoing on the scarred stone bricks. "For such a small amulet, it carries quite a punch. The children were lucky to escape with it." She pulled a red-tinged sword from her side. It sparkled as light hit its blade. "We've heard reports that they're on a ship

headed for Eura,” she said. “What’s there? Another of these so-called gifts?”

Lenori stared ahead, saying nothing.

The woman kneeled so that she and Lenori were face to face. Her hazel eyes were as cold as the floor. Then she placed her sword on the ground, well within Lenori’s reach. It was almost as if the woman were daring Lenori to try to grab it.

“I understand that you don’t want to betray your friends,” the woman said. “But they’re just children. They shouldn’t be fighting these battles. Take pity on them. Spare them any further pain and hardship.”

“They’ve saved the world twice,” Lenori said. “You should not underestimate them.”

The woman inspected her own hands, tracing her fingertips across her numerous rings. The ring on her middle finger was adorned with three small, cone-shaped spikes. She twisted the ring so that the spikes faced the inside of her hand. Then, with a wry smile creeping across her face, the woman slapped Lenori, causing her to cry out more from the shock than the pain. She struck Lenori again, even harder. Lenori’s face burned. The woman’s ring had left its mark.

“And you should not underestimate me,” the woman replied as she twisted her blood-tipped ring back into place.

Lenori let her gaze flicker to the sword lying on the floor. She considered lunging for it, but stopped herself. She was sure that was exactly what the woman wanted. Lenori refused to give her the satisfaction.

Leaving the sword on the floor, the woman picked up a loaf of bread. She tore off a small piece, then popped it into her mouth. “Delicious.” Then she held the bread under Lenori’s nose. “I know you want a bite. You must be delirious with hunger.”

Lenori shook her head.

The woman sighed, then ate a larger piece. “Where are they going, Lenori? What are they searching for? Is there another gift out there? Is it just as powerful as the Heart of the Land?” The woman dropped the remaining bread on the tray, picked up her sword, and returned to her feet. “I promise, if you help me, I will capture them safely and return

them unharmed.” The woman glanced at Brunhild. “You know what happened to Olvan. I would hate for a similar fate to befall those children.”

“You’ll never find them,” Lenori said.

For the first time since entering the room, the woman stopped smiling. “Perhaps another two days without food will help you change your mind.” She snapped her fingers, and the Oathbound warrior returned. Lenori’s insides seized as he picked up the tray.

The braided woman held up her hand, signaling the warrior to stop. With her sword, she sliced off a minuscule hunk of cheese. Barely enough to fill a thimble.

“On second thought, why don’t you keep a piece,” she said, tossing the food at Lenori. It bounced off her leg and landed on the floor beside her. Specks of dirt covered the once pristine cheese.

“See how kind I am? I could have left you with nothing.” The woman stepped out of the room. “But like that food, by kindness will not last forever. Tell me what I want to know, or prepare yourself for death.”

The door slammed shut, leaving Lenori in silence. She picked up the small slice of cheese. Her mouth watered... It smelled even better once in her hands.

Then, slowly, she ground the food between her fingers, disintegrating it.

Her faith may be tested, but she would not falter.

She was a Greencloak.

Committed to the end, no matter what.



ACROSS THE OCEAN

CONOR GLANCED OUT OF THE PORTHOLE OF THE SLEEK clipper as it sliced through choppy seas and strong winds. They had boarded the boat in a small coastal town just north of Concorba. Thanks to a small collection of coins from Worthy—and Rollan’s skill with negotiations—they had been able to secure a cabin with four beds, along with two packs of meager provisions. The room wasn’t nearly big enough for all six of them to comfortably sleep at one time, but Conor and his friends weren’t in the position to be choosy.

Stepping closer to the window, Conor squinted at his reflection in the dirty, smudged glass. He reached to his forehead and ran his fingers along his skin, right where the mark of the Wyrms used to be. The black, swirling mark had faded from view, but he could still feel its power. Its weight. It was an invisible burden he feared he would carry for the rest of his life.

“See anything of interest?” a voice asked behind him.

Smiling, he turned around. Abeke was always light on her feet, even with Uraza, her leopard, in passive state on her arm. Conor flexed his own forearm, watching his muscles ripple underneath Briggan’s mark. He hated leaving the Great Wolf in passive state for so long, but their current mission required stealth, not strength.

Conor looked back out the window and started into the distance. “It could be a mirage, but I think I see land in the distance.”

“I just spoke with the captain,” she said. “We’ll reach port soon.”

Conor grinned. Eura. Green fields. Light blue skies and a cool breeze on his face. “Do you think I’ll be able to see my family?” Conor asked. Although he had seen them recently, he always loved spending time with his parents and brothers. He didn’t even mind getting up early in the morning to herd and shear the sheep. Seeing his family helped to remind Conor that as a Greencloak, he not only fought to protect Erdas, he also fought to protect those closest to him.

“I could show you guys a real Euran meal,” he continued. “Shepherd’s pie and all.”

Abeke frowned, which was more than enough of an answer for him. Rollan had gone to see his mother in Amaya, and as a result, the Oathbound had almost captured them. If it weren’t for Worthy, they probably wouldn’t have escaped.

Abeke saw something in his face—perhaps worry for his family—because she suddenly smiled and said, “Maybe the bounties put out for us by the Oathbound haven’t yet reached all parts of Erdas. If so, and if time allows, I’m sure you’ll be able to see your family. And it would be nice to have a normal meal for once.” She turned to their friends, still asleep. “We should wake the others.”

“You wake up Rollan,” Conor said, pointing to one of the cots on the other side of the room. “He’s always cranky when he doesn’t get enough sleep.”

Conor went to rouse Worthy and Anka while Abeke crossed their quarters. Worthy was curled into a fetal position on his bed, his red cloak draped over his body. Conor wasn’t sure, but he thought that he might have been purring in his sleep.

“Get up, Worthy,” Conor said, giving him a slight nudge.

The Redcloak yawned and stretched, his golden eyes blinking behind his white, cat-shaped mask. Worthy tried to stand, but became unbalanced with the shifting of the ship. He slowly sunk back to the flat mattress. “You should have woken me when we reached land.”

Conor shook his head. In addition to his heightened reflexes and strength, Worthy had also gained his former spirit animal's dislike of water—and a black tail that he preferred no one talk about. Conor wondered what other traits Worthy had inherited when he merged with the wildcat. Hopefully he wouldn't start shedding or hacking up hairballs.

Anka stirred in the bunk beside Worthy. At least Conor assumed it was Anka. Thanks to her chameleon's powers, she had blended in with the threadbare blue blanket covering her, making her almost invisible to the eye. As she sat up, her skin shifted from the muted blue to a warm brown, matching the planks on the cabin walls.

Across the room, Meilin and Rollan yawned. Meilin jumped out of bed, but Rollan remained in the adjacent bunk, pulling his thick brown cloak around him and squeezing his eyes shut. The cloak had seemed too warm for Amaya, but it would serve him well on their journey through Eura. Conor knew how cold the nights could get, and he wondered if they had been too hasty in leaving their trusty green cloaks along the roadside in Amaya.

"I don't always agree with Worthy, but he kind of has a point," Rollan said. "How about you wake us up when we get there?"

Meilin leaned over and thumped Rollan's ear. "Don't you want breakfast?"

Rollan groaned. "Salted flounder and stale biscuits. For the tenth day in a row." He faked a smile. "Yum."

Meilin thumped his ear again. "You've had worse. Remember that meal of seal fat in the Ardu settlement?"

"Don't remind me," he said, rubbing his ear. "I'll take the fish."

"First things first," Anka said, rising from the bed. Her skin a transparent blur. "Worthy, now would be a good time for you to fill us in on everything you know about the next gift."

Worthy leaned back against the wall with his hands behind his head. He had seemed to enjoy withholding this information from them, probably because he wanted to make himself feel more important. For Worthy's sake, Conor hoped that he really knew where the next gift was. If not, Meilin was liable to toss him overboard.

Worthy's gaze settled on Conor. "Do you remember the stories about the great Euran warrior and his black wildcat?" he asked him.

Conor nodded. "A little. The rumors were that the wildcat was as large as Tellun."

"No, even larger," Worthy said. "The beast's booming roar was as loud a thousand erupting volcanoes. Its fur was as dark as midnight during a lunar eclipse, and its diamond-forged claws and teeth could shred the densest of rock."

"I bet it couldn't slice the armor of the famous Amayan gila monster," Rollan mumbled.

Meilin, who was now sitting on the bed beside Rollan, jutted her elbow into his side. "Hush," she warned.

"There was also a rumor about the warrior wielding a powerful sword," Worthy continued. "Its hilt contained a yellow gem that matched the beast's eyes. And its blade was supposedly as sharp as the black wildcat's claws." Worthy paused. "That's what they called it: the Wildcat's Claw."

"Do you know where this sword is?" Abeke asked.

He shook his head. "We used to have a replica of the sword at Trunswick Manor. I used it during the war—that is, until it broke. So much for it being forged from the finest Trunswick iron. Anyway, while it wasn't the real thing, my father kept all sorts journals and histories about to our local legends at the manor. It was sort of an obsession of his. His library would be the best place to research the location of the real Wildcat's Claw."

Conor had remembered seeing the replica of this sword, but only once, when he was working as a servant to Worthy. Worthy had just been the spoiled Devin Trunswick back then, and Conor had been a simple shepherd's son. How times had changed.

"Without any other leads, it seems like our best course of action is to travel to Trunswick," Meilin said. She had risen from the bed, and was now spinning a quarterstaff around herself. "Hopefully we can find the records that will lead us to the real sword."

Conor knew he was beaming, and he didn't even try to hide it. *Trunswick!* Perhaps he would be able to see his family after all. They

lived close to the city, easily within a day's travel.

"We'll need more supplies," Abeke said. "The weather will not be as forgiving as Amaya."

"There are plenty of trading posts on the way to Trunswick," Worthy said. "I think I have enough money to get us what we need."

"Yes, thank you for that," Anka said. "After so many days on the road, it was nice to sleep in a real bed."

"Don't thank me," he said. "Thank the Redcloaks. Shane left us a small fortune when he ... you know ..."

Conor was glad that Worthy didn't finish his statement. Abeke had turned toward the wall, away from them. Shane, the former leader of the Redcloaks, had died while fighting against the Wurm. Abeke didn't speak of him much, but she'd cared greatly for him, even if those feelings were complicated.

"We'll need a lot more than clothing," Anka said. "We need food, weapons, supplies." She leaned against the door, blending in with the splintered wood. "Instead of traveling directly to Trunswick, we should first gather supplies at the Redcloak headquarters. You said they're close, correct?"

Worthy tugged at his collar. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said.

"I agree," Abeke said. "We need to find the next gift as quickly as we can. The longer we wait, the more dangerous it becomes for us and the rest of the Greencloaks."

Rollan cleared his throat. "Look, I'm not a big fan of the Redcloaks—no offense, Worthy—but maybe Anka has a point. It would be nice to get some decent food—something better than flounder, anyway. And maybe some more arrows for Abeke." He glanced at Meilin as she continued to spin her quarterstaff. "And maybe something with a blade for Meilin."

Rollan had been forced to throw in Meilin's sword as part of the deal when he booked the team's passage. She had swiped the sword off an Oathbound in Amaya, and had boasted about using the blade on Wikam the Just whenever they faced off again. Even though Meilin was perfectly capable of besting most warriors without *any* weapons, Conor and the others always breathed a little easier when Meilin was well-

armed—especially when they were facing an army as large as the Oathbound.

Meilin stopped spinning her quarterstaff. “The Redcloaks *are* formidable warriors,” she said, almost begrudgingly. “And there are a lot of Oathbound out there, and only six of us.”

Worthy stood and moved to the center of the room. “They didn’t hold off all those Oathbound in Amaya for us to just show up at their front door,” he said. “We all know we’re being tracked. The last thing I want to do is lead the Oathbound to the Redcloaks. If we fail, the Redcloaks will need to be ready to protect Erdas in our place.”

“Whoa! Hold on there, buddy,” Rollan said. “I just want the Redcloaks’ help *temporarily*. Erdas doesn’t need their protection full time. That’s why there are Greencloaks.”

“You mean the Greencloaks currently locked up in Greenhaven Castle?” Worthy asked. “The Greencloaks jailed at the Citadel?”

“Enough,” Abeke said. “We’re supposed to be the glue, remember. We need to stick together, not fight.” She turned to Conor. “You’ve been quiet. What do you think? Should Worthy take us to the Redcloak base?”

It took Conor a moment to realize that Abeke was talking to him. He was still caught up in the conversation, in hearing his friends argue with each other. If they weren’t successful in saving the Greencloaks, it could soon be them *fighting* against one another, split among their home nations’ armies. Conor against Abeke. Eura against Nilo. Nation against nation. There was no way that Erdas would survive that.

“How far away is the Redcloak headquarters?” he asked.

“At least a week’s journey,” Worthy said. “And that’s if we can travel during the day. It would be much longer if we have to sneak around at night.”

Conor rubbed his arm. He wished Briggan were at his side. He was always more at peace with the wolf beside him. Just running his hands through Briggan’s luxurious gray-white fur calmed him. “We can’t afford to lose that much time,” he said. “I think we should head directly to Trunswick. But if we can’t find anything, Worthy takes us to Redcloak headquarters to regroup and come up with a new plan.”

Everyone slowly nodded in agreement. The glue holding them together was still there, at least for now.

“Enough talk,” Rollan said, clapping his hands. “Who’s up for some stale biscuits?”



After breakfast, which unfortunately was more fish scales than meat, Conor took to the deck of the ship, dodging deckhands as they prepared for landing. A fog had descended over the sea, surrounding the boat and slowing its progress. Conor could no longer see land, but he knew it was there.

He heard the boat’s floorboards creak behind him. Turning, he saw Worthy slowly making his way toward him.

“For being part cat, you’re not very quiet,” Conor said. “You should take lessons from Abeke.”

Worthy snorted at a few sailors as they sped by, their eyes on the ground the entire time. The crew had been leery of him even since they’d left port—the eyes and the mask made him stand out more than the others. Worthy put on a good show, but Conor knew that the whispers and judging looks bothered him. He’d spent enough time with Worthy—and Devin—to recognize when things got under his skin.

Worthy leaned against the railing, then clutched it as the boat lurched again, his claws lodging themselves into the cracked wood. “We’re close,” he said. “I can smell land, even over all this salt water.” He glanced at Conor. “Look, I just wanted to thank you for taking my side back in our cabin.”

Technically, Conor hadn’t taken anyone’s side. He just wanted to get to Trunswick as quickly as possible.

“During our meal, Abeke mentioned that you’d spent time with your family before joining the Greencloaks at the Citadel,” Worthy said. “Did you, um, make it into town?”

Conor shook his head. “No, I mostly stayed close to home. It didn’t seem smart to travel into Trunswick.” Even though the Wyrms had been defeated, people were still distrustful of men in uniform, especially

Greencloaks. For many Eurans, the Greencloaks were just like the Conquerors, only more powerful.

“There’s probably something you should know,” Worthy began. “I ... well ... I kind of don’t know where the records are that will lead us to the Wildcat’s Claw.”

“What?”

“You see, there was a fire at the manor. It was the only way to protect Dawson.” Worthy shook his head. “It’s hard to explain. I was having a really bad day.”

Conor couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “So where are we supposed to look?” he asked.

“My father probably saved his library before he was run out of town. I hope. The fire wasn’t that bad. The last I saw, it had only consumed the top of the castle. And maybe the west wing. And the servants’ quarters.”

“The more you talk, the worse this sounds.” Conor started to walk off. “I need to tell the others—”

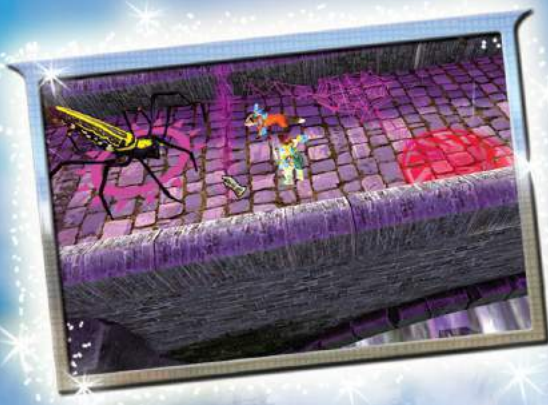
“No! Wait.” Worthy jumped in front of him. He blinked his catlike eyes at Conor. “Please don’t tell them. I want them to trust me.”

“You don’t gain people’s trust by lying to them.”

“I know, it’s just ...” He shook his head. “I just want to be important. I want to be ...”

“*Worthy?*”

He nodded. “I want to be a hero, like you all.” He sighed. “The records are there somewhere. I’m sure.” □Conor stared at Worthy for a long moment. He wished he could see the boy’s face. His mask hid too much, making it hard for Conor to read him. Finally, Conor nodded. “Fine. We’ll keep this between us for now.” He looked back into the fog. “I just hope you’re right about those records. All of Erdas is depending on it.”



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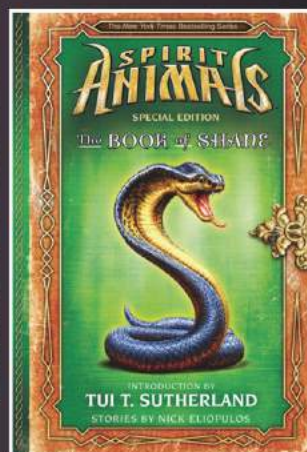
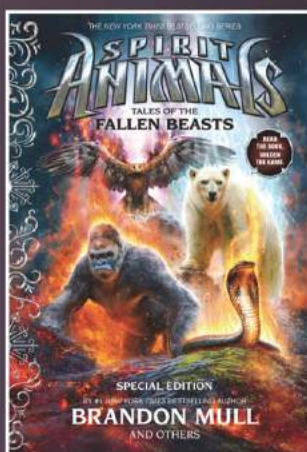
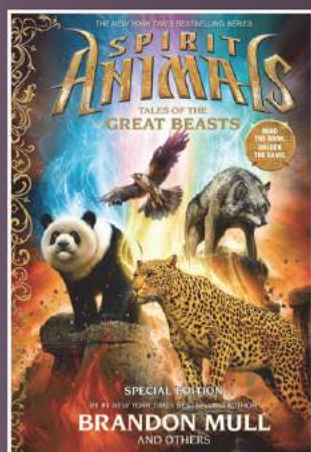
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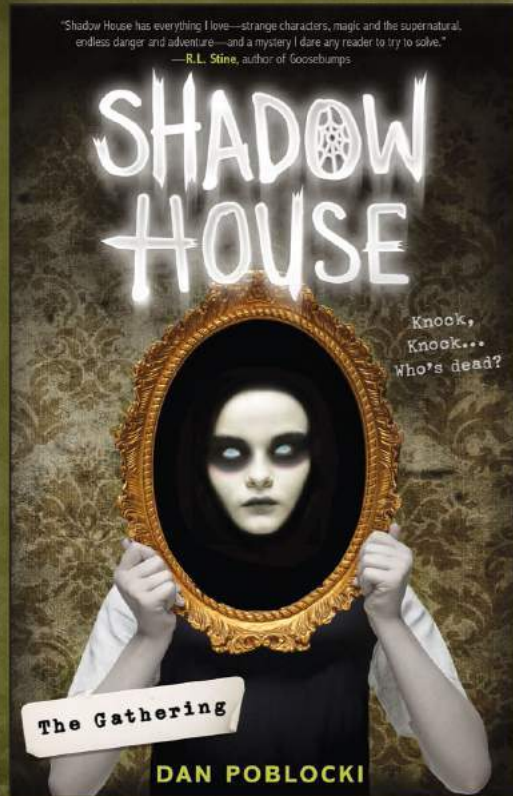
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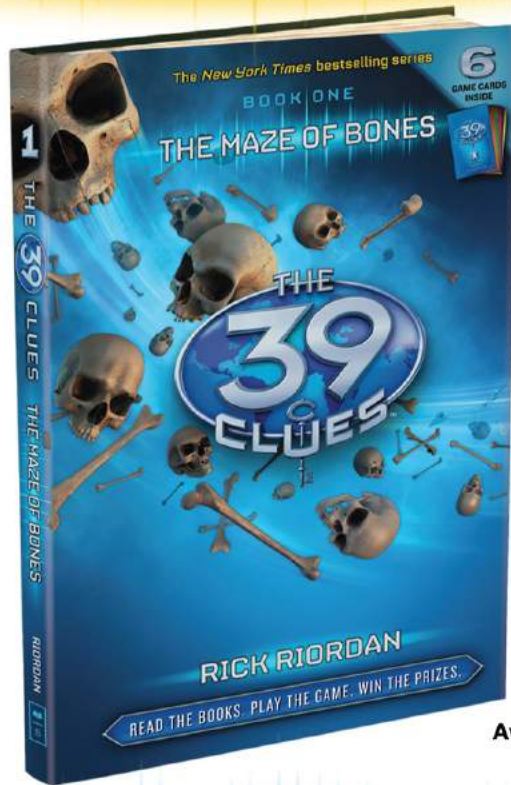
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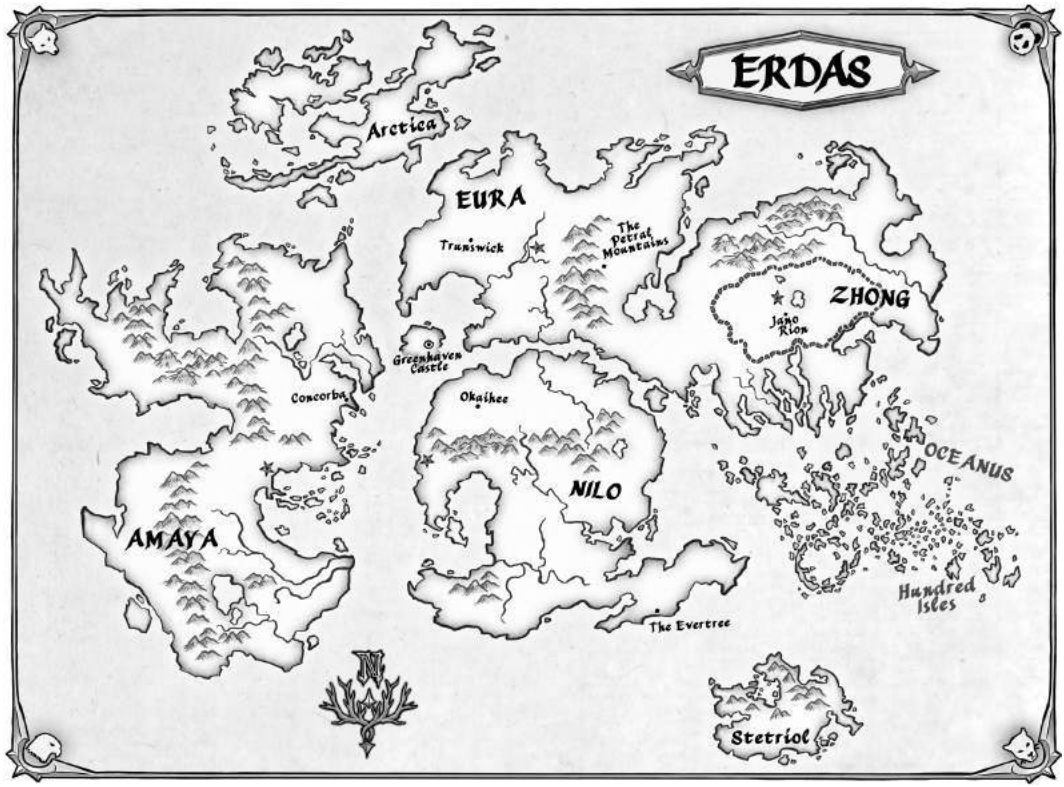


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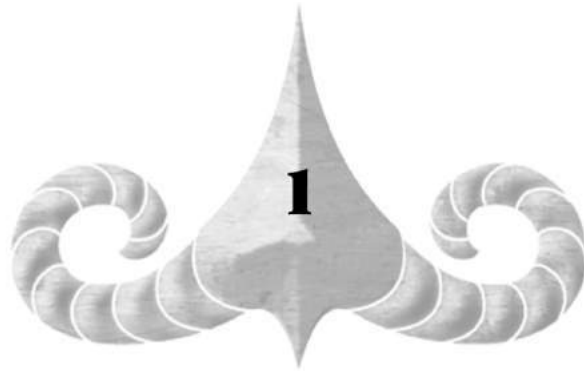
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LENORI

LENORI PACED HER CRAMPED QUARTERS—WHICH WERE little more than a small, single holding cell with meager wood furnishings. She hadn't had contact with Olvan, or any other Greencloaks, since being imprisoned. Most of the others had been captured and returned to Greenhaven Castle, where they would be held for trial, but she and Olvan remained in the Council Citadel.

Olvan.

He'd been struck by a stone viper's fangs, and most of his body was turned to stone. Thanks to her rainbow ibis, Myriam, Lenori could sense his presence. He was in pain, but alive, though she didn't know for how long.

She didn't know how long any of them had.

The Second Devourer War had taken a heavy toll on all the nations, and the Wurm's destructive reign of terror only amplified people's fears. The Greencloaks had saved the world, but it had come at a great price. Despite their best efforts, many people had suffered.

Zerif, under the Wurm's control, had used his immense powers to ravage the world. But these battles weren't just fought in far-off lands like Stetriol or Arctica. There was bloodshed in every village. Neighbor against neighbor. Brother against brother. Mother against daughter. Father against son.

The Greencloaks themselves had inflicted some of the worst damage.

Zerif, armed with the Wyrms' parasites, had taken control of most of their order, and had then turned them loose to wreak havoc in every corner of every land. There was no village, no militia, and no army that could prevail against a legion of Greencloaks when they partnered with their spirit animals. With their true, uninhibited powers now unleashed, the Greencloaks had shown the world just how powerful they'd become.

People were afraid of them. They were angry. They were distrustful. And Lenori couldn't fault any of them for feeling that way.

She and Olvan thought that by coming here to meet with the leaders of the nations, they would be able to soothe any doubts and remind the world that the Greencloaks only wanted to preserve peace. They had even brought along the Four Heroes of Erdas—each from a different nation, but united in their oath to serve and protect all lands. But thanks to traitors within their midst, the Emperor of Zhong had fallen, and the real Greencloaks were left to take the blame.

Lenori pressed her ear against the door to make sure that no one was nearby, but heard only a quiet dripping from the Citadel's leaking roof. She released Myriam from passive state. The ibis strutted around, proudly displaying her rainbow feathers and shaking her long, thin legs.

"No time for showing off, Myriam," Lenori said. "We must find our young friends."

She sat down on the stone floor and closed her eyes. She pushed the cold of the room, the fear of her imprisonment, and the worry for her fellow Greencloaks from her mind. Her pulse slowed and her body relaxed. It was just her, Myriam, and Erdas, united as one.

A hazy image floated before her. She concentrated, trying to sharpen its edges. Trying to bring it into focus. It was a ship, cutting across the ocean. Squeezing her eyes tighter, she saw the Four Heroes huddled in a small room. No—not four. There were six of them. They had been tested recently—she could see the weariness of their faces—but they exuded a sense of accomplishment. Her mind centered itself on Rollan. Her gaze fell to the thin leather strap around his neck.

The Heart of the Land. He had revealed it!

She heard something in the distance. Echoes? Footsteps?

Was there danger on the boat? A trap waiting to be sprung?

She shook her head. Those sounds weren't coming from the ship. Someone was approaching her room.

She blinked, and her mind returned to her cell. She looked at the ibis, sitting calmly beside her. "Myriam, back to me. I don't want them to know that you've been loose."

The rainbow ibis disappeared just as the heavy wooden door swung open. Two Oathbound warriors, both dressed in black, entered the room. She recognized the one with the short blond hair. Sure enough, the woman's brown stone viper flashed into view, curling around her large arm. Brunhild the Merry. She was the one who'd poisoned Olvan.

The other warrior was new to Lenori. Like Brunhild, this woman wore a black uniform with brass neck and wrist collars, but the woman also sported shiny, gaudy rings on most of her fingers. Her long brown hair was twisted into an intricate braid that trailed over her shoulder, like an embroidered rope hanging from a curtain.

The unknown woman snapped her fingers, and a servant entered the room, carrying a tray full of breads, dates, and cheeses. Lenori willed her stomach to remain silent. It was the first food she'd seen in two days.

The servant placed the tray before Lenori, then left the room. The woman with the long braid took a step forward. "Don't you want to eat?"

Lenori pretended that the food wasn't there. "No, I want to be set free."

The braided woman shook her head. "Don't ask for the impossible," she said. "Go on, take a bite. Eat it all. Gorge yourself." She grinned. "I promise it isn't laced with stone viper venom."

Lenori instead curled her hands into her lap. "What do you want from me?"

"We know why your young friends were in Amaya," the Oathbound woman said, whipping her braid over her shoulder and behind her back. She began to pace, her boots echoing on the scarred stone bricks. "For such a small amulet, it carries quite a punch. The children were lucky to escape with it." She pulled a red-tinged sword from her side. It sparkled as light hit its blade. "We've heard reports that they're on a ship headed for Eura," she said. "What's there? Another of these so-called gifts?"

Lenori stared ahead, saying nothing.

The woman knelt so that she and Lenori were face-to-face. Her hazel eyes were as cold as the floor. Then she placed her sword on the ground, well within Lenori's reach. It was almost as if the woman were daring Lenori to try to grab it.

"I understand that you don't want to betray your friends," the woman said. "But they're just children. They shouldn't be fighting these battles. Take pity on them. Spare them any further pain and hardship."

"They've saved the world twice," Lenori said. "You should not underestimate them."

The woman inspected her own hands, tracing her fingertips across her numerous rings. The ring on her middle finger was adorned with three small, cone-shaped spikes. She twisted the ring so the spikes pointed from the inside of her hand. Then, with a wry smile creeping across her face, the woman slapped Lenori. Lenori cried out, more from the shock than the pain. Then the woman struck Lenori again, even harder. Lenori's face burned. The woman's ring had left its mark.

"And you should not underestimate me," the woman replied as she twisted her blood-tipped ring back into place.

Lenori let her gaze flicker to the sword lying on the floor. She considered lunging for it, but stopped herself. She was sure that was exactly what the woman wanted. Lenori refused to give her the satisfaction.

Leaving the sword on the floor, the woman picked up a loaf of bread. She tore off a small piece, then popped it into her mouth. "Delicious." Then she held the bread under Lenori's nose. "I know you want a bite. You must be delirious with hunger."

Lenori shook her head.

The woman sighed, then ate a larger piece. "Where are they going, Lenori? What are they searching for? Is there another gift out there? Is it just as powerful as the Heart of the Land?" The woman dropped the remaining bread on the tray, picked up her sword, and returned to her feet. "I promise, if you help me, I will capture them safely and return them unharmed." The woman glanced at Brunhild. "You know what

happened to Olvan. I would hate for a similar fate to befall those children.”

“You’ll never find them,” Lenori said.

For the first time since entering the room, the woman stopped smiling. “Perhaps another two days without food will help you change your mind.” She snapped her fingers, and the Oathbound warrior returned. Lenori’s insides seized as he picked up the tray.

The braided woman held up her hand, signaling the warrior to stop. With her sword, she sliced off a minuscule hunk of cheese. Barely enough to fill a thimble.

“On second thought, why don’t you keep a piece,” she said, tossing the food at Lenori. It bounced off her leg and landed on the floor beside her. Specks of dirt covered the once pristine cheese.

“See how kind I am? I could have left you with nothing.” The woman stepped out of the room. “But like that food, my kindness will not last forever. Tell me what I want to know, or prepare yourself for death.”

The door slammed shut, leaving Lenori in silence. She picked up the small slice of cheese. Her mouth watered.... It smelled even better once in her hands.

Then, slowly, she ground the food between her fingers, disintegrating it.

Her faith may be tested, but she would not falter.

She was a Greencloak.

Committed to the end, no matter what.



ACROSS THE OCEAN

CONOR GLANCED OUT OF THE PORTHOLE OF THE SLEEK clipper as it sliced through choppy seas and strong winds. They had boarded the boat in a small coastal town just north of Concorba. Thanks to a small collection of coins from Worthy—and Rollan’s skill with negotiations—they had been able to secure a cabin with four beds, along with two packs of meager provisions. The room wasn’t nearly big enough for all six of them to comfortably sleep at one time, but Conor and his friends weren’t in the position to be choosy.

Stepping closer to the window, Conor squinted at his reflection in the dirty, smudged glass. He reached to his forehead and ran his fingers along his skin, right where the mark of the Wyrms used to be. The black, swirling mark had faded from view, but he could still feel its power. Its weight. It was an invisible burden he feared he would carry for the rest of his life.

“See anything of interest?” a voice asked behind him.

Smiling, he turned around. Abeke was always light on her feet, even with Uraza, her leopard, in passive state on her arm. Conor flexed his own forearm, watching his muscles ripple underneath Briggan’s mark. He hated leaving the Great Wolf in passive state for so long, but their current mission required stealth, not strength.

Conor looked back out the window and stared into the distance. “It could be a mirage, but I think I see land in the distance.”

“I just spoke with the captain,” she said. “We’ll reach port soon.”

Conor grinned. Eura. Green fields. Light-blue skies and a cool breeze on his face. “Do you think I’ll be able to see my family?” Conor asked. Although he had seen them recently, he always loved spending time with his parents and brothers. He didn’t even mind getting up early in the morning to herd and shear the sheep. Seeing his family helped remind Conor that as a Greencloak, he not only fought to protect Erdas, he also fought to protect those closest to him.

“I could show you guys a real Euran meal,” he continued. “Shepherd’s pie and all.”

Abeke frowned, which was more than enough of an answer for him. Rollan had gone to see his mother in Amaya, and as a result, the Oathbound had almost captured them. If it wasn’t for Worthy, they probably wouldn’t have escaped.

Abeke saw something in his face—perhaps worry for his family—because she suddenly smiled and said, “Maybe the bounties put out for us by the Oathbound haven’t yet reached all parts of Erdas. If so, and if time allows, I’m sure you’ll be able to see your family. And it would be nice to have a normal meal for once.” She turned to their friends, still asleep. “We should wake the others.”

“You wake up Rollan,” Conor said, pointing to one of the cots on the other side of the room. “He’s always cranky when he doesn’t get enough sleep.”

Conor went to rouse Worthy and Anka while Abeke crossed their quarters. Worthy was curled into a fetal position on his bed, his red cloak draped over his body. Conor wasn’t sure, but he thought that he might have been purring in his sleep.

“Get up, Worthy,” Conor said, giving him a slight nudge.

The Redcloak yawned and stretched, his golden eyes blinking behind his white, cat-shaped mask. Worthy tried to stand, but became unbalanced with the shifting of the ship. He slowly sank back to the flat mattress. “You should have woken me when we reached land.”

Conor shook his head. In addition to his heightened reflexes and strength, Worthy had also gained his former spirit animal's dislike of water—and a black tail that he preferred no one talk about. Conor wondered what other traits Worthy had inherited when he merged with the wildcat. Hopefully he wouldn't start shedding or hacking up hairballs.

Anka stirred in the bunk beside Worthy. At least Conor assumed it was Anka. Thanks to her chameleon's powers, she had blended in with the threadbare blue blanket covering her, making her almost invisible to the eye. As she sat up, her skin shifted from the muted blue to a warm brown, matching the planks on the cabin walls.

Across the room, Meilin and Rollan yawned. Meilin jumped out of bed, but Rollan remained in the adjacent bunk, pulling his thick brown cloak around him and squeezing his eyes shut. The cloak had seemed too warm for Amaya, but it would serve him well on their journey through Eura. Conor knew how cold the nights could get, and he wondered if they had been too hasty in leaving their trusty green cloaks along the roadside in Amaya.

"I don't always agree with Worthy, but he kind of has a point," Rollan said. "How about you wake us up when we get there?"

Meilin leaned over and thumped Rollan's ear. "Don't you want breakfast?"

Rollan groaned. "Salted flounder and stale biscuits. For the tenth day in a row." He faked a smile. "Yum."

Meilin thumped his ear again. "You've had worse. Remember that meal of seal fat in the Ardu settlement?"

"Don't remind me," he said, rubbing his ear. "I'll take the fish."

"First things first," Anka said, rising from the bed, her skin a transparent blur. "Worthy, now would be a good time for you to fill us in on everything you know about the next gift."

Worthy leaned back against the wall with his hands behind his head. He had seemed to enjoy withholding this information from them, probably because he wanted to make himself feel more important. For Worthy's sake, Conor hoped that he really knew where the next gift was. If not, Meilin was liable to toss him overboard.

Worthy's gaze settled on Conor. "Do you remember the stories about the great Euran warrior and his black wildcat?" he asked him.

Conor nodded. "A little. The rumors were that the wildcat was as large as Tellun."

"No, even larger," Worthy said. "The beast's booming roar was as loud as a thousand erupting volcanoes. Its fur was as dark as midnight during a lunar eclipse, and its diamond-forged claws and teeth could shred the densest of rock."

"I bet it couldn't slice the armor of the famous Amayan gila monster," Rollan mumbled.

Meilin, who was now sitting on the bed beside Rollan, jutted her elbow into his side. "Hush," she warned.

"There was also a rumor about the warrior wielding a powerful sword," Worthy continued. "Its hilt contained a yellow gem that matched the beast's eyes. And its blade was supposedly as sharp as the black wildcat's claws." Worthy paused. "That's what they called it: the Wildcat's Claw."

"Do you know where this sword is?" Abeke asked.

He shook his head. "We used to have a replica of the sword at Trunswick Manor. I used it during the war—that is, until it broke. So much for it being forged from the finest Trunswick iron. Anyway, while it wasn't the real thing, my father kept all sorts of journals and histories about our local legends at the manor. It was sort of an obsession of his. His library would be the best place to research the location of the real Wildcat's Claw."

Conor had remembered seeing the replica of this sword, but only once, when he was working as a servant to Worthy. Worthy had just been the spoiled Devin Trunswick back then, and Conor had been a simple shepherd's son. How times had changed.

"Without any other leads, it seems like our best course of action is to travel to Trunswick," Meilin said. She had risen from the bed, and was now spinning a quarterstaff around herself. "Hopefully we can find the records that will lead us to the real sword."

Conor knew he was beaming, and he didn't even try to hide it. *Trunswick!* Perhaps he would be able to see his family after all. They

lived close to the city, easily within a day's travel.

"We'll need more supplies," Abeke said. "The weather will not be as forgiving as Amaya."

"There are plenty of trading posts on the way to Trunswick," Worthy said. "I think I have enough money to get us what we need."

"Yes, thank you for that," Anka said. "After so many days on the road, it was nice to sleep in a real bed."

"Don't thank me," he said. "Thank the Redcloaks. Shane left us a small fortune when he ... you know ..."

Conor was glad that Worthy didn't finish his statement. Abeke had turned toward the wall, away from them. Shane, the former leader of the Redcloaks, had died while fighting against the Wurm. Abeke didn't speak of him much, but she'd cared greatly for him, even if those feelings were complicated.

"We'll need a lot more than clothing," Anka said. "We need food, weapons, supplies." She leaned against the door, blending in with the splintered wood. "Instead of traveling directly to Trunswick, we should first gather supplies at the Redcloak headquarters. You said they're close, correct?"

Worthy tugged at his collar. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said.

"I agree," Abeke said. "We need to find the next gift as quickly as we can. The longer we wait, the more dangerous it becomes for us and the rest of the Greencloaks."

Rollan cleared his throat. "Look, I'm not a big fan of the Redcloaks—no offense, Worthy—but maybe Anka has a point. It would be nice to get some decent food—something better than flounder, anyway. And maybe some more arrows for Abeke." He glanced at Meilin as she continued to spin her quarterstaff. "And maybe something with a blade for Meilin."

Rollan had been forced to throw in Meilin's sword as part of the deal when he booked the team's passage. She had swiped the sword off an Oathbound in Amaya, and had boasted about using the blade on Wikam the Just whenever they faced off again. Even though Meilin was perfectly capable of besting most warriors without *any* weapons, Conor and the others always breathed a little easier when Meilin was well-

armed—especially when they were facing an army as large as the Oathbound.

Meilin stopped spinning her quarterstaff. “The Redcloaks *are* formidable warriors,” she said, almost begrudgingly. “And there are a lot of Oathbound out there, and only six of us.”

Worthy stood and moved to the center of the room. “They didn’t hold off all those Oathbound in Amaya for us to just show up at their front door,” he said. “We all know we’re being tracked. The last thing I want to do is lead the Oathbound to the Redcloaks. If we fail, the Redcloaks will need to be ready to protect Erdas in our place.”

“Whoa! Hold on there, buddy,” Rollan said. “I just want the Redcloaks’ help *temporarily*. Erdas doesn’t need their protection full time. That’s why there are Greencloaks.”

“You mean the Greencloaks currently locked up in Greenhaven Castle?” Worthy asked. “The Greencloaks jailed at the Citadel?”

“Enough,” Abeke said. “We’re supposed to be the glue, remember? We need to stick together, not fight.” She turned to Conor. “You’ve been quiet. What do you think? Should Worthy take us to the Redcloak base?”

It took Conor a moment to realize that Abeke was talking to him. He was still caught up in the conversation, in hearing his friends argue with one another. If they weren’t successful in saving the Greencloaks, it could soon be them *fighting* against one another, split among their home nations’ armies. Conor against Abeke. Eura against Nilo. Nation against nation. There was no way that Erdas would survive that.

“How far away is the Redcloak headquarters?” he asked.

“At least a week’s journey,” Worthy said. “And that’s if we can travel during the day. It would be much longer if we have to sneak around at night.”

Conor rubbed his arm. He wished Briggan were at his side. He was always more at peace with the wolf beside him. Just running his hands through Briggan’s luxurious gray-white fur calmed him. “We can’t afford to lose that much time,” he said. “I think we should head directly to Trunswick. But if we can’t find anything, Worthy takes us to Redcloak headquarters to regroup and come up with a new plan.”

Everyone slowly nodded in agreement. The glue holding them together was still there, at least for now.

“Enough talk,” Rollan said, clapping his hands. “Who’s up for some stale biscuits?”



After breakfast, which unfortunately was more fish scales than meat, Conor took to the deck of the ship, dodging deckhands as they prepared for landing. A fog had descended over the sea, surrounding the boat and slowing its progress. Conor could no longer see land, but he knew it was there.

He heard the boat’s floorboards creak behind him. Turning, he saw Worthy slowly making his way toward him.

“For being part cat, you’re not very quiet,” Conor said. “You should take lessons from Abeke.”

Worthy snorted at a few sailors as they sped by, their eyes on the ground the entire time. The crew had been leery of him ever since they’d left port—the eyes and the mask made him stand out more than the others. Worthy put on a good show, but Conor knew that the whispers and judging looks bothered him. He’d spent enough time with Worthy—and Devin—to recognize when things got under his skin.

Worthy leaned against the railing, then clutched it as the boat lurched again, his claws lodging themselves into the cracked wood. “We’re close,” he said. “I can smell land, even over all this salt water.” He glanced at Conor. “Look, I just wanted to thank you for taking my side back in our cabin.”

Technically, Conor hadn’t taken anyone’s side. He just wanted to get to Trunswick as quickly as possible.

“During our meal, Abeke mentioned that you’d spent time with your family before joining the Greencloaks at the Citadel,” Worthy said. “Did you, um, make it into town?”

Conor shook his head. “No, I mostly stayed close to home. It didn’t seem smart to travel into Trunswick.” Even though the Wyrms had been defeated, people were still distrustful of men in uniform, especially

Greencloaks. For many Eurans, the Greencloaks were just like the Conquerors, only more powerful.

“There’s probably something you should know,” Worthy began. “I ... well ... I kind of don’t know where the records are that will lead us to the Wildcat’s Claw.”

“What?”

“You see, there was a fire at the manor. It was the only way to protect Dawson.” Worthy shook his head. “It’s hard to explain. I was having a really bad day.”

Conor couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “So where are we supposed to look?” he asked.

“My father probably saved his library before he was run out of town. I hope. The fire wasn’t that bad. The last I saw, it had only consumed the top of the castle. And maybe the west wing. And the servants’ quarters.”

“The more you talk, the worse this sounds.” Conor started to walk off. “I need to tell the others—”

“No! Wait.” Worthy jumped in front of him. He blinked his catlike eyes at Conor. “Please don’t tell them. I want them to trust me.”

“You don’t gain people’s trust by lying to them.”

“I know, it’s just ...” He shook his head. “I just want to be important. I want to be ...”

“*Worthy?*”

He nodded. “I want to be a hero, like you all.” He sighed. “The records are there somewhere. I’m sure.”

Conor stared at Worthy for a long moment. He wished he could see the boy’s face. His mask hid too much, making it hard for Conor to read him. Finally, Conor nodded. “Fine. We’ll keep this between us for now.” He looked back into the fog. “I just hope you’re right about those records. All of Erdas is depending on it.”



THE COUNTRYSIDE

THE FULL MOON ILLUMINATED THE OTHERWISE DARK sky as Meilin and the others departed the ship. Once they were a safe distance away from the pier, Abeke and Conor released their spirit animals. Briggan rolled in the tall grass, still damp from fog, then yelped like a pup playing with a bone. Conor scolded him at first, but then dropped down and tackled him, wrapping his arms around the wolf as if he were a toy instead of a Great Beast.

Uraza pawed the grass cautiously, then sniffed the air. Her ears perked up, her purple irises narrowed, and the fur rose on the scruff of her neck.

“I smell it, too,” Abeke said, pulling an arrow from her quiver. “We’ll be back in a second,” she whispered to the others. “We’re off to catch our next meal.”

As they slipped away, Rollan looked toward the sky and watched as Essix looped through the air. Finally, she flew to his shoulder, settling on the heavy brown cloak. Unlike the other animals, Essix had chosen to remain free, only returning to the ship when she needed a rest. Rollan pulled out a piece of dried fish and offered it to the bird. The gyrfalcon picked at the food, then squawked. Splaying her brownish-gold wings wide, she took to the air again, leaving the limp piece of meat in Rollan’s fingers.

“See, even Essix is tired of fish,” he mumbled. He took a bite of it, frowned, then spit it out.

“Are you going to release Jhi?” Anka asked Meilin. Anka was hidden, just a ripple beside her. She had taken on the characteristics of her surroundings, and was now just as dark as the nighttime sky.

“We should get moving,” Meilin said. “I’ll release her once we set up camp.”

Anka placed her hand on Meilin’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I think we can spare a few minutes if you want to see her.”

Meilin smiled. It *would* be good to see Jhi, even if only for a few moments. A flash struck the sky, and then there was Jhi, a mountain of black and white standing before her. Meilin placed her hands on the panda’s plush fur. Jhi was warm—Meilin could have curled up against her right then. Jhi gave the girl a playful lick, making Meilin laugh.

“Yes, I’ve missed you as well.” She hugged the animal. “We have a long way to travel. But don’t worry. I won’t make you walk the entire way.”

That earned Meilin another lick from the Great Panda.

“We’ll only have a few hours of travel before we have to stop,” Meilin said to Anka. “Do you think there’s any way we could travel during the day?”

“I don’t think we can chance it,” she said. “My powers can conceal us, but not when we’re constantly moving. And certainly not over landscapes as open as this.”

“Then we’d better get moving,” Meilin said. “Everyone ready?”

Conor sat up from the ground. A few blades of grass poked from his blond hair. “Where’s Abeke? Didn’t she run off to get—?”

“Already back,” Abeke said, holding up a rabbit. Uraza followed with another white rabbit between her jaws. “Hopefully we’ll be able to hunt more along the way,” she said. “It would be good to avoid any big settlements for as long as possible.”

“We’ll have to stop eventually,” Conor said. “The closer we get to Trunswick, the colder the days will become.” He nodded toward Rollan. “That is, unless Rollan shares his cloak with us.”

Rollan seemed to blush as he pulled the thick brown cloak tightly around him. “Hey, get your own, wolf-boy.”

Meilin rolled her eyes. “Let’s get moving.” She gave Jhi one last pat, then called her back into passive state. “Worthy, this is your territory,” she said to the Redcloak. “Lead the way.”



They spent the next few nights traveling down dusty, rutted dirt roads and twisting paths while sleeping during daylight. Abeke and Conor were able to find food for them, but as Conor had suggested, food wasn’t their major problem. It was cold during the day, and even more frigid at night. Rollan, now carrying the larger of the group’s two packs, had eventually given up his brown cloak to others as they took turns sleeping. The first snow flurries had already begun to dust the landscape. They would need to stop soon for warmer clothes.

But it wasn’t just snow that they encountered on their trek. Meilin also saw country cottages in shambles, dilapidated wooden fences along many of the roads, and the skeletons of burned bridges over small, winding streams. Sheep and pigs, once clearly domesticated, now ran wild, without a shepherd or farmer in sight to watch over them.

“What do you think happened here?” Anka asked a couple of days later as they paused by another abandoned, crumbling home. “Is all this destruction from the Second Devourer War? I thought they would have had a chance to rebuild by now.”

“I’m going to scout on ahead,” Conor said. “Maybe I can find some food. Or somewhere to bed down.” Briggan nuzzled his partner’s hand, then took off up the road. Conor, his ax tight in his hands, ran behind him.

Meilin placed her staff against the crumbling stone wall separating the house from the road. “This isn’t the work of the Conquerors,” she told Anka. “It was Greencloaks, when they were under the power of Zerif and the Wyrms.”

“I only heard about the battles in Nilo and Stetriol,” Anka said.

“They were everywhere,” Meilin said. “The Wyrms wanted to control everything and everyone. And once it had the Greencloaks under its

power, it had the perfect army. Mindless, powerful, trained warriors. And we were the heroes of the Second Devourer War. Every gate was already open to us.”

“This wasn’t the Greencloaks’ fault,” Abeke added, her voice huffy. “None of this would have happened if not for Zerif and the Wym. They alone are to blame for all this destruction.” She cast her eyes at Conor up ahead.

“I know,” Meilin said, keeping her voice calm. “I’m not accusing him.”

Abeke sighed, and the tension released from her body. “I’m sorry. I know that you understand the truth.” She looked up the road again. “I’m going to find Conor. You all catch up when you can.”

“Should we follow them?” Rollan asked, once Abeke and Uraza had disappeared over a hill.

“No, give them a moment,” Meilin said. She nodded toward Worthy, who was stretched out in the grass. “I don’t think Worthy would mind a few extra minutes of rest.”

Meilin took a sip of water from a canteen, then handed it to Anka. As soon as she took it, it turned a gray color to match the stones they sat against. “But as I understand it, Conor wasn’t even in Greenhaven when Zerif attacked,” Anka said.

Meilin nodded. She and Conor had been deep underground, in Sadre, when he finally succumbed to the Wym. She had seen it firsthand, how evil and destructive he’d become. “It doesn’t matter where he was,” Meilin said. “He still feels guilty about it. It wasn’t his fault. He’ll come to realize that, in time.”

“How can you be so sure?” Anka asked.

Meilin didn’t know how to answer Anka, so instead she began reorganizing her bag. According to Worthy, they were nearing a town. They needed supplies, so it would be a rare chance to indulge in some civilization. They could get some clothes. Food. And maybe a weapon or two.

Meilin stood, slipping her pack over her shoulders. “Rollan, want to wake Worthy?”

“More like Sleepy,” Rollan said. “Seriously, how can he nap at a time like this?”

As Rollan walked to the Redcloak, who was now snoring, Meilin picked up a loose stone from the ground and returned it to the rock wall. Jhi could heal a lot of things, but unfortunately her powers couldn't fix this. “The people of Eura will eventually rebuild,” she said. “Perhaps that's something we Greencloaks can help with, once we've found the three other gifts.”

“You want to build houses and fences?” Anka asked. “That seems so unlike you. So ... beneath you.”

“Why? Because I'm a warrior?” Meilin shrugged. “I spent time helping to rebuild Zhong after the war. It's important work. Maybe even more important than always looking for a fight.” She glanced at her quarterstaff. “Just because I'm good at battle doesn't mean I want to do it all the time. And if you hadn't noticed, I'm partnered with Jhi—a healer, not a fighter. Jhi helped me realize there's more to life than taking up arms every time there's a new threat.” Meilin watched as Rollan tried to rouse Worthy, to little avail. The boy began sleepily pawing at Rollan's hands.

“So what will you do next, once this is over?” It took Meilin a second to realize that Anka was now standing beside her, instead of sitting down. “Retire your green cloak?”

“No way,” she said. “I'll always be a Greencloak.” She watched as Rollan tried to pull Worthy to his feet by his cloak. “Plus, I couldn't quit. Rollan would be lost without me.”

“Yes, it's clear that you care for him very much,” Anka replied.

“Yeah, he's okay.” Meilin would have preferred to have Anka's chameleon powers right then. She hoped that it was too dark for the elder Greencloak to see how Meilin's skin was reddening.

“Not every Greencloak is best served on the battlefield,” Anka said. “I wouldn't last five minutes in a real battle.”

“Even the best warriors don't always return from battle,” Meilin said. “That's just the way war works.”

Meilin became quiet again as she envisioned the death of the Emperor of Zhong. She could still see the snarl of the hyena as it leaped past her.

She could still see the emperor staggering, clutching his neck, and collapsing. Then the image morphed, and she was now watching her own father, General Teng, as he died on the battleground during the Second Devourer War. He and the emperor, both felled in similar ways. Both had died in silence, like true Zhongese warriors.

“Meilin? Are you okay?” Anka asked. “You became quiet all of a sudden.”

“It’s nothing....” She looked at Anka, wishing she could see her face. She valued her friends, but she also enjoyed traveling with another person from Zhong. And a woman, no less.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Meilin began. “What did your father say when you decided to join the Greencloaks?”

“He didn’t know,” Anka said. “He died in battle during the war, like General Teng.”

Meilin hoped that her face didn’t reveal how shocked she was. She hadn’t told Anka who her father was. It still felt strange to talk about him out loud. In the past tense.

“I took up the cloak a few months afterward,” Anka continued. “After everything the Greencloaks had done for Erdas—for Zhong—it seemed like the best way to help.” She gave Meilin a wry smile. “Plus, it wasn’t as if I could join the Zhongese army, could I?”

“I’ll teach you some more fighting techniques when we make camp,” Meilin said.

“That would be good, although I don’t know how much help Toey will be in battle.”

“I used to think the same about Jhi,” Meilin said. “You’d be surprised by the different types of strength we draw from our partners when we fight.” Then, a few moments later, she added. “How long have you known that General Teng was my father?”

“I’ve always known. You’re a hero in Zhong, just like General Teng.” Anka paused, and a few seconds later a small flash came before Meilin’s eyes. Slowly, Anka’s full form trickled into view, like spilled ink spreading across a blank page. Meilin realized the flash had been Anka calling Toey, her chameleon, into passive state.

“Just so you know, everyone in my village wept when we learned of General Teng’s fate.” Anka offered up a small, sympathetic smile. “The entire nation mourned. He was a true protector of Zhong.”

Meilin turned from Anka then, so she wouldn’t see her face. *Yep, she thought, I’d kill to have those chameleon powers right now.*



THE MARKET

“**W**HY CAN’T I GO?” WORTHY DEMANDED, CROSSING his arms and planting himself in front of Rollan and Anka. As he spoke, white tufts of cold air spilled from his mouth. His red cloak billowed behind him, making him look more ferocious than Rollan knew he really was.

“Really? You don’t think that white mask will draw any attention?” Rollan asked. “We’re supposed to be keeping a low profile. Blending in.” According to Worthy and Conor, they were about five days away from Trunswick. Although unlikely, it was still possible that people from the village would recognize Conor and Worthy, which would jeopardize their mission.

“Don’t you remember the last time you and Conor tried sneaking into a city?” Worthy said, still adamant. His words had as much bite as the frosty morning air. “If it wasn’t for me, you would have been captured.”

“Worthy, heroes aren’t supposed to boast,” Meilin said. “And don’t worry—I’ll be there to keep Rollan in line.”

“Um, thanks for the vote of confidence,” Rollan said as Meilin smirked at him. Then he nodded toward Conor. “Why can’t you be more like Conor, Worthy? You don’t see him complaining about staying at camp.” A few feet away, Conor stomped out the remaining embers from their fire. They had used it to cook a snake that he and Briggan had caught last night. Worthy only took one bite before spitting out the

tough, lean meat ... which had just meant that there was more for Rollan to eat. Sure, Rollan liked to joke about how bad the food was when he was traveling, but it was almost always better than the food he'd had to forage from garbage bins while he was living on the streets in Concorba.

What will happen if the Greencloaks disband? he wondered. He knew he wouldn't have to go back to his old life as an orphan, but he was still worried. Would the Prime Minister force him to fight for Amaya? Force him to fight against his friends?

Force him to fight against Meilin?

He thought about his cloak, hidden in one of the packs now beside Conor. He had snuck it in there a few nights ago while the others were sleeping. Rollan had been the last of the four to take the Greencloak oath. Now he couldn't imagine being anything except a Greencloak. And he couldn't imagine giving up Tarik's cloak.

"What about Anka?" Worthy asked as she and Abeke approached them. He was still rambling on about accompanying them into the village. "She could turn me invisible."

Anka was shaking her head before Worthy even finished. "It's too hard for me to hide everyone when we're moving, especially in a crowded market," she said. Anka looked so different with her chameleon in passive state. Her hair was as black as Meilin's bangs, but much shorter. The jade bracelet on her wrist covered the mark of her spirit animal. "The second someone bumps into you, our cover will be blown," she continued. "How much attention do you think that will draw, once people realize there are invisible kids walking around the square?"

"Think of it this way," Rollan said, "you can catch up on your beauty sleep."

Worthy looked back toward their makeshift campsite. "Perhaps a small nap wouldn't be so bad. Have to be ready whenever the Oathbound show up. Just try to find some decent food. Something not so ... slithery."

"We'll see what we can do," Abeke said. She knelt and petted Uraza. "Sorry, girl. I know you want to run free, but Rollan's right. We've got to blend in, and that's hard to do with a purple-eyed leopard walking around." With a growl, Uraza disappeared onto her arm. Abeke stood

and looked at Rollan. “I won’t lie. I’m pretty jealous of you and Essix right now.”

Essix sat on a nearby branch, surveying the group. She hadn’t liked their snake dinner, either, but Rollan was sure she was finding plenty to eat around the countryside. Essix had always been more of a free spirit, preferring to roam the skies instead of remaining hidden on Rollan’s body. But even with him on the ground and her in the air, their bond was unshakable.

“Remember, we aren’t supposed to know one another,” Anka said to Rollan and Meilin, as she and Abeke started down the road. “Don’t talk to us unless you absolutely have to.”

“See you there,” Rollan said. “Or I guess, maybe not.” They’d decided to split up that morning, in order to draw even less attention to themselves. Rollan and Meilin would approach the village from the west, while Abeke and Anka took a southern, circular route. Abeke and Anka were responsible for gathering clothes and food. Rollan had wanted to buy the food, but of course, Meilin wanted to be in charge of purchasing the weapons. Anka had offered to switch places with him, but he politely declined, turning bright red in the process.

“Worthy is right about one thing,” Meilin said as Anka and Abeke disappeared around a bend. “We need to be ready whenever the Oathbound show up. I’m surprised we haven’t seen any trace of them yet.”

“Maybe they don’t know we’re here,” Rollan said.

“Well, they weren’t supposed to know we were in Amaya, and they were able to track us anyway,” Meilin said. “I almost wish they’d show up already. Anything is better than all this sneaking around. If I have to fight, I prefer to face my enemies head-on.”

“Patience, Your Highness,” Rollan said. He knew how much it got underneath Meilin’s skin when he called her things like that, which just made him tease her more. “What do you think, Essix? Want to take another look to see if you can spot those goons in black?”

Essix and Rollan held each other’s gaze for a few seconds, then the Great Falcon took flight, her talons sharp and pointed, her feathers rustling in the breeze.

“Thanks,” Meilin said. “Let’s get moving.”

They didn’t speak for a while. Meilin may have liked all the silence, but Rollan thought the rolling countryside was *too* quiet. He missed the busy streets of Concorba. The crowded hallways in Greenhaven Castle. His mind tended to wander when he was surrounded by silence, and he often found himself thinking about things that he’d rather not. His mother. The Wyrms. Shane. Tarik.

Rollan knew he was acting childish—like a toddler refusing to give up his baby blanket. He was a Greencloak in spirit and heart—and he didn’t need Tarik’s cloak to remind him of his oath. Worse, as a kid growing up on the streets, he knew the dangers of getting too sentimental about material things. But even with all that—even with all the risks of getting caught—he just couldn’t part with the cloak. Not yet. It was old, tattered, and faded, but it was all that he had to remind him of their former mentor. Rollan had been clutching that very cloak in his hands when Tarik was killed in battle. Part of Rollan feared that once it was gone, then Tarik would be truly gone as well.

“Are you okay?” Meilin asked. “You’re frowning.”

“Oh.” Rollan shook his head, trying to clear those thoughts away. He plastered a smile on his face. “Was just thinking about all the yummy foods I’m going to try when we get to the market.”

Meilin arched an eyebrow. She knew him too well. She wasn’t buying it. “Tell me what you’re really thinking about,” she said. “Maybe it’ll help to talk.”

The sun had just broken the tree line, helping to drive the chill from the air. He noticed how the yellow-orange rays seemed to make Meilin’s face glow.

Rollan shook his head. “I’ll be okay, but thanks for asking.”

They didn’t speak for a few more moments. Rollan could sense Meilin looking at him, but he was too nervous to look back. Then he felt something tugging at his arm.

It was her hand, sliding into his.

Rollan was so surprised, he almost tripped over a rock. He caught himself before falling, then gave Meilin’s hand a slight squeeze. “Did you see that big boulder?” he asked. “It was huge. Colossal. Mountain-

sized.” He stood a little taller. “You’d better stick close to me, just in case we see any other dangerous obstacles in our way.”

She rolled her eyes, but she didn’t let go of his hand.

Green fields stretched as far as Rollan could see. Without sheep and goats to graze the land, many of the fields were overgrown with long, flowing blades of grass. In others, thorny wildflowers and weeds threatened to overtake the lush meadows. Ahead on a hill, a few sheep wandered in a pasture, the fence weathered but holding. A young boy stood with a crook and a small dog at his side. Rollan was glad to see the boy. It proved that not everything had been destroyed. Farther away, plumes of black smoke rose to the sky. It was probably from the bakers and cooks in the village, preparing their wares for the day’s shoppers. *A warm loaf of bread would be nice*, he thought to himself. He was sure that Essix would enjoy it as well.

“So what do you think about Worthy?” Meilin asked after a few more moments. “Do you trust him yet?”

Rollan wanted to keep the imaginary taste of warm rolls and honey in his head for a little bit longer, but it was already fading away. “What makes you ask that?”

She tugged on Rollan’s arm. “You can be a little mean to him sometimes.”

Meilin was way too perceptive. He sighed. “I’m trying to like him,” Rollan said. “But I don’t know if I’ll ever really trust a Redcloak.”

“But they helped us defeat the Wyrms. And we wouldn’t have gotten away from the Oathbound in Amaya if not for them.”

“Yeah, but they were Conquerors before they were Redcloaks,” Rollan said. “Remember Shane—before he turned into a Redcloak? How he betrayed us at Greenhaven Castle? Remember how he and the other Conquerors tricked my mom into taking the Bile so they could control her? How they forced her to attack me? Remember what happened to your father? To Tarik?” His voice caught when mentioning his former mentor’s name. “They have a lot to prove before they’re ready to be the ‘next protectors of Erdas.’ For all we know, they might be planning to stab us in the back and steal the gifts as soon as we collect them all.” As Rollan said this, he realized that he had left the Heart of the Land, the

gift from Amaya, at the campsite for safekeeping. Now he wondered if that had been a good idea.

Meilin stared ahead; she seemed to be considering Rollan's argument. The Meilin of old would have been arguing back before Rollan had even finished talking, but she'd changed a lot since he'd first met her. She was calmer now. More thoughtful. More considerate. A lot like Jhi.

Of course, they all had changed a bunch since they'd first become a team. That's what happened when you risked your life to save the world from total destruction. Twice.

"Okay, I understand where you're coming from," she said slowly. "Really, I do. But what if you try to separate Worthy from all the other Redcloaks. *He's* not so bad, right?"

Rollan shrugged. "I know he's been a big help here of late, but that still doesn't erase all the bad things he did when he was plain old Devin Trunswick. Don't forget, he and I didn't exactly hit it off the first time we met."

Meilin smirked. "Are you still mad about him jailing you in the Howling House? Didn't he apologize to you on the boat on the way here?"

"You'd still be mad, too, if you'd seen the size of those rats in that little cell. And the smell—it was worse than a pigsty." He ran his thumb across the back of her hand, tickling her. "There were spiders, too. Thousands of them, all with red eyes and hairy legs and—"

"Okay, I get your point," Meilin said, shuddering. With her free hand, she loosened the scarf covering her neck. "But that was a long time ago. Essix seems to like Worthy."

"She just likes to hang around him because he always has leftover food," Rollan said. "What do *you* think about him?"

"I *want* to trust him," she said. "He's different now, and I'm not just talking about his wildcat powers. He really wants to do good."

"Good is relative," he said. "Think about it—I'm sure that the Emperor of Zhong and the Prime Minister of Amaya thought they were acting in their lands' best interests when they told the Greencloaks to disband. They were doing what was good for their people."

"But not what was good for Erdas."

Rollan shrugged. “Again, it’s all in the eye of the beholder.” The dark plumes of smoke from the village market were getting larger. They would reach the town soon. Rollan almost wished it were farther away. That wouldn’t have been so bad ... as long as he got to hold Meilin’s hand for the rest of the walk. That would have made the extra distance totally worthwhile.

“What about Anka?” Rollan asked. “I saw you training her yesterday in camp.”

“I like her. It’s nice to have someone from Zhong around,” she said. “We have a lot in common.”

“You mean you’re both afraid of spiders?” Rollan teased.

“I’m not afraid of spiders,” Meilin said. “I’m—what is it?”

Rollan had stopped walking. He let go of Meilin’s hand and turned his face to the sky. “It’s Essix. She’s calling me.” He looked around to make sure they were alone on the path. “Watch my back.”

She nodded, rolling up her sleeves. When Rollan saw through Essix’s eyes, it was almost like he was in a trance; in a slumber from which he sometimes couldn’t easily wake himself. He wouldn’t be able to defend himself if someone attacked while he was floating around in the falcon’s head. That was a benefit of having Meilin around. Even without weapons, her fists and feet were just as deadly as swords and staves.

Rollan closed his eyes. His world fell away—his fingers and toes, the chill from the morning air, the warmth he’d just experienced by holding Meilin’s hand—and he suddenly felt a whoosh as he connected with Essix. Clouds floated ahead. For a second, Rollan wondered if the bird was just trying to show off her fancy flying skills. Then Essix dove, and the market square rushed up to him. Rollan knew he was probably staggering; he always got a little motion sickness when she flew too fast. Essix eventually leveled out and soared to the top of a lush evergreen tree. Rollan used her eyes to search the already-bustling crowd. For a small village market, it was filled to capacity with merchants and shoppers. Burlap tents sat in a grid, with merchants shouting out their deals to anyone within earshot. Each baker boasted of having the best sweets in the village; each tailor promised that he sold the finest clothes and warmest coats. Woman wearing plain, long skirts and scarves over

their heads walked through the square, using their slender fingers to judge the craftsmanship of the wool quilts and thick winter hats. Their small children lagged behind, asking for coins to buy a piece of hard candy or a muffin or a scone. A few steps away, less well-to-do kids stood on the outskirts of the market, hoping on strangers' kindness for their next meals. Rollan focused on the smallest child, a boy with a dirt-streaked face and a faded blue blanket draped around his bony shoulders. Rollan tried to memorize the boy's face. If Rollan could find them again, he'd buy something for the kids when he reached the village. That had been him, before becoming a Greencloak.

He kept searching the grounds. Essix had obviously seen something, but he didn't know what. Finally, he saw it. Or rather, them. Three men and a woman in black uniforms, with brass wrist protectors and neck collars, stepped out of a tent.

The Oathbound were in Eura.

Rollan watched as the men followed the woman to another tent. The woman was tall, with broad shoulders and a long brown braid. The merchant stepped toward them, no doubt trying to sell his latest, overpriced goods. The woman held up a parchment, cutting him off mid-sales pitch. She jutted her finger at the document while the merchant shook his head. Then the woman leaned in and whispered something else. The man's eyes widened, and his mouth became slack-jawed. The woman, now smirking, patted the man on the cheek—not at all an affectionate touch—then moved on to the next tent. The merchant remained in place, rubbing his face. Rollan wasn't sure, but it looked like the woman had drawn blood.

After the Oathbound disappeared into another tent, Essix took off from her perch. Rollan understood exactly where the falcon was off to. She would find Anka and Abeke, while Rollan and Meilin rushed to the market.

The bird's view of the sky faded away. Rollan blinked. He was back on the roadside with Meilin. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oathbound." He took her hand again. "Come on. We need to find the others."



Rollan and Meilin had to stop running once they drew closer to the market. Their narrow path had merged with a larger road bustling with travelers on foot and horseback. Rollan wished Conor was here to see all the people heading to the village. It was another sign that Eura was rebuilding. Things were getting better.

Rollan and Meilin slipped into the stream of travelers and entered the village. A horse carrying a large, lopsided pack on its back huffed in his direction, blowing stale air across his face. Rollan shook his fist at the animal. He still didn't like horses. The feeling was seemingly mutual.

Nearing the market at the center of the village, Rollan heard a squawk. Essix! She sat in another tree, almost hidden by its thick, knobby branches. She and Rollan stared at each other, and she quickly made a flapping motion with her brown wings.

"She wants us to follow her," Rollan said. "I think she found them."

The bird took flight. Meilin and Rollan followed a few steps behind, both glancing in opposite directions, trying to keep an eye out for the Oathbound. Rollan had seen only four of them in the market—a number that didn't pose too much of a threat—but they may have been Marked, making a potential battle even more of a challenge. Others were likely camped nearby. They'd faced off against a full garrison in Amaya. He didn't expect anything different here.

As he passed a wooden cart, a familiar flash of faded blue cloth caught Rollan's eye. He paused, then turned away from the market.

"Rollan," Meilin whispered. "Where are you going?"

Rollan kept walking toward the boy. He and a few other kids stood between two carts, either using them to hide or perhaps to protect themselves from the biting wind. Rollan checked his pockets. He could only spare a few coins. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

"Don't spend them all in one place," he said, tossing two coins to the boy. "And share with your friends."

The boy gave Rollan a smile warm enough to melt the coldest of hearts. Rollan returned to Meilin. She was grinning as well.

"You're such a softie," she said. "It's one of my favorite things about you." Then her smile faded. "But we should hurry. For all we know, the Oathbound have already found Anka and Abeke."

Rollan looked at the sky. Essix circled over a large white-and-brown tent. A woman in a stained apron stood in front, showing off slabs of dried meats.

Rollan's stomach grumbled. That looked so much better than snake stew.

They picked up the pace, weaving through villagers. They entered the tent to find Abeke and Anka quarreling with a merchant. It seemed to be over the price of a bag of grain.

Abeke was always astute about her surroundings, even when Uraza was in passive state. She stopped arguing with the man, turned, and caught sight of Rollan and Meilin. She whispered something to Anka. Not looking in their direction, Anka slowly nodded, then continued her talk with the merchant.

Abeke walked toward them, under the pretense of looking at other provisions on the makeshift shelves.

"What are you doing here?" Abeke didn't look at Rollan as she whispered. "Anka said—"

"We caught sight of the Oathbound," Rollan replied. "They're here, in the village."

Abeke drew a long breath, then nodded. "I was afraid you'd say that. I've been uneasy ever since we reached the village." She picked up a jar of spiced peaches, then frowned at them. "We picked up some warm clothes and are almost finished with the food. You two should head back to the camp. We'll meet you there as soon as we can."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Rollan said. "If there are Oathbound here, we'll have a better chance of defeating them together."

"Yes, but I'd rather not see them at all," Abeke said. She chanced a glance at Meilin. "What do you think?"

"I think if they're here, in Eura, then we'll have to fight them sooner or later," Meilin said. "And I think it would be easier if we faced them with better weapons."

"You want to buy a sword, don't you?" Rollan said. "How many arrows do you have left, Abeke?"

"Not nearly enough." Abeke had been collecting rocks to shape into arrowheads during their trek through Eura, but it was difficult to see

them at night. “There’s a trading post on the west side of the market—the tent with the maroon flag. It’s probably the best place for you to find weapons. Anka and I will finish up here and meet you back at camp.”

They nodded, then slipped back out of the tent. The trading post wasn’t hard to find. In addition to the maroon flag waving overhead, it was surrounded by trappers and hunters. They stood outside, laughing and singing.

Meilin frowned as she passed the men. “You said your cell at the Howling House smelled like a pigsty. Was it as wretched as these men smell?” she asked, almost gagging.

Rollan had put his hand over his nose. “These guys are way worse. Maybe that’s how they attract their prey—by imitating the scent of dead animals.”

Once in the tent, they quickly made their way toward the weapons. The selection was meager—swords made from rusted steel and bows from flimsy wood—but they were able to find a couple quivers of arrows for Abeke.

“What can I help you kids with?” a woman asked, approaching them. Her apron matched the flag flying over the tent. The wart on the end of her nose was large enough to be its own body part.

“Just these,” Meilin said, holding up the arrows. “That is, unless you have any decent swords.”

“Something just came in.” She patted her graying hair, rolled up tightly into a bun. “Come. Take a look. I’ll give you a good price.”

They followed the woman to the center of the tent. Behind them, about twenty hunters entered. They were loud, their drinks sloshing from their mugs as they lumbered through the post.

The woman took a sword from behind the counter. She slowly removed it from the black leather scabbard. It was a beautiful, single-edged blade, clearly cared for. There didn’t seem to be a single nick in the metal. The hilt also looked new, with intricate symbols carved into the steel.

“It’s a falchion,” the merchant said. “One of the trappers just brought it in for a trade.”

“I’m familiar,” Meilin said. “It’s similar to the Zhongese dao.” She picked up the sword, then considered its weight. She took a few steps away, quickly spinning the weapon in her hands. The blade almost buzzed as it sliced the air.

“It’s a good weapon,” Meilin finally said. “It’s well-balanced.”

The merchant studied Meilin. “You’re pretty good with a sword. Most of the hunters swing it like an ax, but you ... you’ve been trained in proper swordplay technique.” She scratched her nose. “What did you say your name was again? And what brings you to this little village?”

Meilin stiffened ever so slightly. Rollan realized that she might have been *too* good with the weapon.

“My father used to be a warrior. He trained me.” She quickly returned the sword back to the counter. “But I gave that up. Too messy. Now I just sing and dance.” She looped her arm into Rollan’s and smiled broadly. “We’re traveling performers.”

“Did someone say performers?”

Rollan turned. The group of trappers must have overheard their conversation. Each carried a long, two-sided ax, similar to Conor’s. Their fur boots were caked with mud.

At least Rollan hoped it was mud.

The largest of them, a bearded man with a belly shaped like a big black cauldron, stumbled forward. “How about you all put on a little performance? After weeks in the wilds, my mates and I could use a good show.”

Rollan quickly sized up the men. About half of them had encircled Rollan and Meilin. That meant at least ten more were roaming around inside the tent, and no telling how many remained *outside*. He was sure that he and Meilin could get away, but a dramatic escape would draw too much attention. The Oathbound soldiers were probably still in the market.

“Well?” the trapper asked, scratching at his red-and-gray beard. Flakes of dandruff fell to the ground. “You going to perform for us or not? Or are you not any good?”

Meilin let go of Rollan’s arm. “If you insist,” she said. “I just hope you all tip well.”

Meilin unwrapped her scarf from her neck as she moved to the center of the group. Rollan slowly moved his hand toward his dagger. He wanted to be ready whenever she gave the signal.

But Meilin didn't take a fighting stance. Instead, she closed her eyes and placed her hands in front of her like she was meditating. Slowly she balanced on one foot. And then she tipped to her toes and began to spin like a top. Exiting her spin, she leaped through the air, her arms wide, the scarf twirling around her like a silk ribbon. She followed that up with three backflips.

Rollan couldn't believe it. She was actually dancing.

The trappers began to clap and cheer. Meilin began to move faster, performing more spins, and flipping even higher. Her scarf was like an extension of her, twisting whenever she twisted, spinning whenever she spun.

Something hit Rollan against the back of his head. He turned, ready to fight ... and then he saw the gold coin on the ground.

Cupping his hands, he began collecting money from the men. They were generous—both of Rollan's pockets were weighted down with gold and silver pieces once Meilin had finished her routine. As she took her last bows, Rollan realized that she hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Let's get those arrows and get out of here," he said, dumping the money into her hands. More trappers had entered the shop. They seemed friendly enough, but he didn't want to press his luck.

Her eyes widened as she counted the money. "I think there's enough here to buy both quivers *and* the sword."

"Meilin, you already have a weapon. Or do you not remember the quarterstaff that you swindled from that pirate on the boat?"

"I didn't swindle him," Meilin said. "I won that arm-wrestling contest fair and square. The rules didn't specify that we couldn't use a spirit animal." She glanced at the merchant. She had laid the sword out on the counter, along with two quivers of arrows. "Maybe she'll negotiate," she said.

"Just hurry up and—"

"Jolly good show, mates," the large trapper said, interrupting them. He had particularly seemed to enjoy the dance, clapping and doing a jig

during Meilin's performance. His belly had looked like it was moving in slow motion. "So what do *you* do?" he asked, slapping Rollan on the back.

"I'm a dancer in training," Rollan said, rubbing his shoulder blade. Then he smiled. "Actually, more like the company jester."

Rollan had been in enough situations to know that when lying, it was best to tell the truth as much as possible.

"So where are you kids off to next?" he asked. "I'll be back in the wild with my mates soon, and it would be nice to see a proper performance."

"Um ... why don't you go ahead and finish getting those supplies," Rollan said to Meilin. He couldn't tell if the trapper was really interested in their show, or if he was trying to out-bluff Rollan. Either way, Rollan knew they needed to make a quick exit.

Meilin nodded and headed to the counter.

"Yeah, you should totally check out one of our shows," Rollan said to the man. "I'm not sure where we're off to next. Like I said, I'm new to the group. They don't tell me anything—just where to sleep and when to rise. The real brains of our troupe is still in camp, off the road to the west of town."

They had actually bedded down to the east of town. Just in case his ploy didn't work, he hoped the trapper would search there instead of their real location.

"Well, where have you been to?" he asked.

"We passed through Betarvius a few days ago," Rollan said. Other than Trunswick, it was the only name of a town that he remembered. They hadn't stopped there, but he had seen signs for it along the trail.

"Oh, is that so?" The trapper's eyes creased, and Rollan's mouth went dry. Did the trapper know that Rollan was lying? Had Rollan said something to tip him off? That was the problem with bluffing too much. Lie enough times and you're eventually going to get caught.

"Did you try the pickled hog toes?" the trapper continued, scratching his thick beard. He took a lumbering step toward Rollan. "The town is famous for them."

“No, um, I’m more of a vegetarian,” Rollan said. “I’d better get my friend. Nice talking to you.”

Rollan rushed to the counter. “Look, I’m trying to be reasonable,” Meilin was saying to the merchant. “But there is no way I’m paying that much for that sword. Perhaps you could—”

“We’re good with just the arrows,” Rollan said, picking up the quivers. “Thanks.” He grabbed Meilin’s hand and pulled her out of the tent.

“I just needed a few more minutes,” she said. “I almost had her talked down.”

“We didn’t have a few more minutes,” Rollan said. He pulled Meilin into a narrow space between two tents and waited. Sure enough, the large trapper stormed by, with two other men following him.

“Trouble?” she asked.

“Maybe. The trapper was asking too many questions. I tried to throw him off our trail. We’ll see if it worked.” Then he smiled. “You were awesome back there, by the way. Why don’t you dance like that more often?”

She shrugged. “Dancing and fighting aren’t all that different.” She looked over her shoulder, back at the tent, and sighed.

“Don’t worry,” Rollan said. “I’m sure we’ll be able to make it out of the village without being caught.”

“Oh, it’s not that,” she said. “I was just thinking—that was a really nice sword.”



REMEMBERING OLD FRIENDS

ABEKE RELEASED URAZA AS SOON AS THEY WERE within view of their campsite. She had told Anka that she wanted Uraza alert and ready, just in case any Oathbound soldiers were nearby. But if she was being honest, she also wanted Uraza by her side because she hated the idea of not seeing—and not sensing—her animal partner.

Abeke's stomach twisted into a knot and her mouth went coppery every time she relived the memory when Uraza had been stolen from her. How she'd gone from sharing her every thought with the leopard to suddenly feeling nothing. It was like falling endlessly down a dark, deep, cold pit. She hadn't known what loneliness truly felt like until their bond was ripped apart.

But that sense of loneliness paled in comparison to how Abeke had felt when she'd actually *fought* Uraza. The leopard, while under Zerif's control, had tried to attack her. Abeke was sure that her spirit animal would have killed her, if not for Shane. He'd put himself between Abeke and the Great Beast, screaming in pain as the golden leopard sank her teeth into him and shook him like an empty burlap sack. Abeke had been forced to fire on Uraza, shooting her in the leg in order to get her to release Shane, but it had been too late. Shane was gone.

Abeke often found herself looking at Uraza's hind right leg when she thought the animal was asleep. She couldn't see the results of the wound from her arrow—Uraza's golden fur had covered any resulting scar. But still, she knew it was there, hidden out of sight. A wound dealt by her own hand.

Uraza, perhaps sensing what was going through Abeke's mind, lovingly rubbed against her leg. Abeke knelt and scratched the leopard behind the ears. Abeke had been surprised, and even comforted, by the amount of affection that they'd shown each other since rebonding.

She often wondered how Uraza had felt when their bond had been snapped. Did she feel the pain as well? The emptiness? And how had the leopard felt under Zerif's control? Did she know what she was doing when she attacked Shane? When she tried to attack Abeke?

Perhaps they both needed comfort.

As they waited for the sun to set, Anka suggested they all rest, but that seemed impossible with the threat of the Oathbound looming over them. Meilin had told the others how she and Rollan tried to throw the villagers off their trail. No one really trusted that it would work.

Finally, after the sun dipped below the tree line, they packed up and continued their journey toward Trunswick. Worthy and Abeke took the lead, taking the group through an overgrown, lush forest. Large pine trees reached to the sky, blocking what little light they received from the moon. Abeke winced as pinecones and needles crunched underfoot—they were sure to draw the attention of the Oathbound.

Worthy eventually directed them to a small, barely noticeable trail snaking through the trees. In some places, the path was so narrow that they couldn't walk side by side. In other places, tree branches and exposed roots had overtaken the trail, slowing their travel considerably. However, this route was safer than taking one of the roads, now that they knew the Oathbound had reached Eura.

Even with Uraza boosting her senses, it was hard for Abeke to see in the forest. Every snap of a twig, every howl of an animal, every caw of a bird put Abeke on edge. It was like the forest itself were looking down on them, watching and waiting to pounce.

"Look sharp," Abeke said to Uraza. "They could be anywhere."

“No way they’ll find us here,” Worthy said, ducking underneath a low branch. “No one knows about this path.” He glanced at Abeke, his slitted eyes stark beneath his white mask. “You move like Uraza, you know. Delicately. Softly. All catlike.”

“So do you.”

Worthy leaped and did a flip, just to show off. He landed in a crouch, on top of a stump. “Yep. It’s one of the only benefits of merging with my spirit animal.”

Abeke could have shown off as well, and probably could have leaped even higher than Worthy had, but that didn’t seem like such a good idea. “Maybe you should save your energy for our enemy,” Abeke offered.

Worthy just nodded. They continued on in silence for a few more paces, now walking shoulder to shoulder. Behind her, Abeke heard Rollan and Meilin arguing over her dance moves. Apparently, Rollan was challenging her to a dance-off once they saved the world—again. Farther behind them were Conor and Briggan, guarding the rear. Like Abeke, Conor seemed to be so much more at peace with his spirit animal at his side, not stuck in passive state. Anka was somewhere in the group as well, but it was hard for Abeke to sense her, especially when she was using her chameleon powers.

They reached a small river cutting through the forest. The bubbling of the water was nice. Calming. Abeke could imagine living in a place like this. Disappearing from the world.

They stopped to take a sip of water. She cupped her hands into the cool river, then brought the water to her mouth.

Uraza knelt beside Abeke and stuck her snout close to the water, doing her best to reach the river without getting her paws muddy. She quickly lapped it up with her tongue, causing small waves of water to ripple away from her. Uraza paused, and her eyes narrowed.

“What is it?” Abeke asked. “Do you hear something?”

Uraza nodded toward the water. There, below the surface, swam three large fish.

“Not today,” Abeke said, running her hands along the animal’s black-and-gold fur. Water from Abeke’s hands beaded on her coat. Then, before the cat could respond, Abeke cupped her hand in the water and

splashed Uraza. The leopard jumped and yowled. Then she playfully tackled Abeke, nipping at her ears and fingers.

“I’m sorry!” Abeke laughed, hugging Uraza around the neck. “I know you don’t like the water. I just couldn’t help myself.”

She turned around. Worthy sat on a log behind her. She wondered if he’d been watching her the entire time.

“I could never understand what he saw in you,” Worthy said. “I thought you all were just self-righteous brats. But now that I’ve spent some time with you, I can see why he liked you so much.”

Abeke didn’t need to ask who *he* was. She rose from the river, wiping her hands on her clothes. “What is this river called?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“I believe this is a small tributary of the Adunder, one of the widest and longest rivers in Eura,” Worthy said. “It starts at the Petral Mountains and continues all the way to the coast.” He hopped from his log and took a drink of water as well. Abeke noticed that he drank it like Uraza, on all fours with his face close to the water.

He stood and wiped his face. “Want me to knock down a tree for us to use as a bridge?”

Abeke smiled. “No, I have a better idea. Come on, Uraza.” Abeke and the Great Leopard backed up from the river, then exploded down the trail. Abeke felt the leopard’s power flowing between them. Her legs felt stronger, her steps surer. She resisted the urge to roar as she planted her foot and took off in a leap across the water, her limbs spinning in the air. Uraza was right beside her, the leopard’s body long and sleek in the nighttime sky. They landed together, their feet clearing the muddy banks. They turned to see Worthy on the other side. Slowly, he clapped his hands.

“Do you want *us* to cut down a tree for *you*?” Abeke asked.

He shook his head. “I’ll find my own way across.” Dropping into a squat, he lunged for the nearest tree. His claws sank into the dark wood as he moved higher into the air. He then leaped onto a nearby branch. Thin and wiry, it looked too small to hold his weight. But Abeke quickly realized what Worthy was doing. Using the branch like a rope, he swung from tree to tree, his cloak billowing behind him as he crossed the river.

He performed a triple somersault before landing beside Abeke. She rolled her eyes, but still clapped for him.

“Shane also mentioned you were a great acrobat,” he said.

Abeke sighed. *Maybe it would be good to talk about him*, she told herself. She often wanted to, but always felt uncomfortable when bringing him up around the other Greencloaks. She had forgiven him for betraying them, but the others had not. And in Rollan’s case, she didn’t know if he would ever forgive Shane.

“Did Shane really talk about me?” she asked. Even though they were alone, she found herself whispering.

“Sometimes,” Worthy said. “You know, since we’re being honest and all, most of us Redcloaks didn’t really like you guys at first. Nobody likes being beat, even if they eventually realize they’re fighting on the wrong side.” They started walking again, but more slowly. “Shane would let us joke around about the Greencloaks, even letting us say some not-so-nice things about Conor and Rollan. Especially Rollan. But you were always off-limits.”

Abeke didn’t know how to respond. There was so little that she knew about Shane once he’d become the leader of the Redcloaks. He had become this whole new person—someone capable of redeeming himself for his past actions. But now he was gone.

“Shane—or King, as we called him—was a good leader,” Worthy continued. “Without him, there’s no telling what any of us Redcloaks would be doing right now. I’d probably be locked in a cage in someone’s sideshow carnival.”

Abeke laughed. “Somehow, I don’t see you staying locked up for very long. You’re a very good fighter.”

Abeke could see Worthy stand straighter at that remark. “Thanks. I wish I could say it was all my natural and self-taught abilities, but King also trained us. Better than Zerif ever did. He turned us into a real fighting force. A team. He showed us how to work together.”

Abeke narrowed her eyes and really considered Worthy for a few moments. In the dark, with the red cloak billowing around his shoulders, he almost looked like Shane.

Worthy coughed and looked away. “What? Do I have something stuck to my mask?”

“You miss him, don’t you?” she said. “You miss Shane.”

He nodded after a few seconds of silence. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

She placed her hand on his shoulder. “You know you can talk to me about him anytime.” She shrugged. “I miss him, too. It might be good for me as well.”

“You were there when he ...” Worthy glanced at Uraza, then back at Abeke. “You were there at the end, right? Was he in a lot of pain?”

“He didn’t suffer long,” Abeke said.

“Look, I know you and he were ... close,” he said. “And I know how he died. Uraza—”

“She didn’t kill him,” Abeke said, a tremble in her voice. Her hands had instinctively balled into fists. “It wasn’t Uraza’s fault.”

“Yeah. I know,” Worthy said. “It was really Zerif and the Wyrms that were forcing her to do it, but still, and the end, it was *her* teeth pressed into his flesh.” He pulled at his collar. “I guess what I’m asking is—given how you felt about him—are you ever angry at Uraza?”

“Of course not,” Abeke said as she stopped walking. She reminded herself to calm down. Worthy wasn’t the enemy. None of them were. “Remember how, because of the Bile, you were forced to do a lot of things against your will?” After he nodded, she said, “Uraza was the same way. So was Conor. So were all the Greencloaks.” They began walking again. “However, that doesn’t mean I’m not sad about what happened between us. I wish Zerif had never stolen her. I wish I didn’t have to shoot her in the leg. But those things happened whether she or I like them or not. And now we just have to figure out a way to live with our actions.”

But as Abeke spoke, she realized she didn’t know if Uraza had forgiven *her* for shooting her with an arrow. Uraza hadn’t had a choice in the matter when attacking Shane. Abeke had. Abeke had willingly chosen to harm her partner.

“You know, I’ve never admitted this,” Worthy began, “but I talk to Elda like she’s still here.”

“Elda?”

“My wildcat.” He looked around, like he was making sure that no one was close enough to hear them. “I talk to her sometimes. In my head. I apologize for how I treated her. I made her do things against her will—kind of like what Gerathon did to me and the others that took the Bile.”

Abeke remembered Worthy’s wildcat. She was large and ferocious, with fur as black as squid ink. Her eyes had been golden, like Worthy’s were now. She wasn’t a natural spirit animal. She had been enslaved by the Bile. When drunk by a human, the liquid could force a spirit animal bond, making the chosen animals smarter and more deadly—but also completely obedient. And when animals had drunk the Bile, well ... Abeke didn’t wish that fate on the worst of her enemies.

“I did a lot of bad things, but now I finally have the chance to make things right,” Worthy said. “Even if it takes the rest of my life, I’m going to make it up to the world. I’m going to redeem myself.”

Abeke knew that Shane had felt the same way. And he *had* eventually redeemed himself.

At the cost of his life.



They continued on through the night. Worthy was actually a half-decent traveling companion when he wasn’t complaining or whining.

Eventually they stopped for a longer break. “How much farther?” Worthy asked. “My legs are as soft as noodles.”

Seeing the exhausted stoop of Worthy’s posture made Abeke realize how tired she was as well. “Just a couple more hours,” she said. “Then we’ll look for somewhere to bed down. Take a rest until nightfall.” She sat down on an overturned, partially buried log and took a sip of water. After a long drink, she offered the canteen to Worthy. As he finished off the water, Uraza nudged at the log, perhaps looking for some small vermin for a late-night snack.

“Knowing Meilin, she’ll want to keep moving,” Worthy said. He looked up at the canopy of tree branches, still blocking most of the moonlight from entering the forest. “She’ll say this forest is dense enough that we can keep moving without being seen.”

Abeke took the empty canteen from him. “You’re probably right. But let’s discuss it when the others catch up.” Abeke could just see them approaching. It was hard to tell, but it almost looked like Rollan and Meilin were holding hands.

Worthy pulled a stick of jerky from his pocket. Breaking it into three pieces, he offered some to Uraza and Abeke. “I’m excited about going home,” he said between bites. “A soft bed. Clean sheets. Maybe a warm meal or two—something other than snake and rabbit.” He popped the last of the jerky into his mouth. “But I also really want to see my brother. I miss him.” Worthy cleared his throat and gave Abeke a wayward glance. “But, um, don’t tell Dawson I said that. I have a reputation to protect, after all.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He seemed to hesitate, then sat down beside Abeke. “Speaking of secrets, there’s something I need to tell you. Something about the Wildcat’s Claw.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t exactly know—”

“Wait.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, quieting him. “Do you hear that?” she whispered.

“What is it?” Worthy asked, spinning around. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Yes. And that’s the problem.” The forest had suddenly grown too quiet. It was as if something had driven all the wildlife away.

Abeke slipped her bow from her shoulder and motioned for Worthy to follow her. They crept behind a large trunk and sank to the ground. Uraza crouched beside her.

“Uraza, go warn the others,” Abeke said, staring into the leopard’s purple eyes. “Lead them back to us. But quietly. Try to stay hidden as much as you can.”

Uraza’s tail flicked behind her and she sank even lower, then she took off through the forest. Her padded paws hardly made a sound as she scurried around the trees.

Abeke pulled an arrow from the new set of quivers Rollan and Meilin had purchased from the market. She was appreciative of the arrows, but she almost wished she’d just made more herself. Many of the new arrowheads were chipped and unbalanced, which could throw them off their mark when released.

She spun as she heard crunching leaves to her left. Nocking an arrow and pulling back on the string, she searched the darkness, looking for her target. Beside her, Worthy flexed his claws, uttering a low, guttural growl.

“Whoa! It’s us,” Anka whispered. A few seconds later, she and the others appeared in front of them. “Sorry.”

“That was close,” Abeke said, releasing the tension in her bow.

“Briggan and I sensed something, too,” Conor said. He shrugged off the smaller of their two packs, then dropped down beside Abeke. “It feels like a trap.”

“Do you think it could be the Oathbound?” Abeke asked.

“If so, they must have been following us,” Worthy said. “This is one of the most hidden, most secret—what’s that sound?”

Abeke heard it, too. A low whistling sound pierced the air. Suddenly recognizing it, she yelled, “Get down!”

They all dropped to the ground as an arrow flew overhead and lodged into a tree trunk. Two more arrows followed, each striking to the left and right of the group.

They scurried behind a log as more arrows sliced the night sky. “Look alive, Greencloaks,” Abeke said, reloading her bow. “We’re under attack.”



TRAPPER ATTACK

MEILIN USUALLY LIKED THE THRILL OF HAND-TO-HAND combat over the use of projectile weapons, but when an unseen enemy was firing arrows at her, she really wished she was a better archer.

“Can anyone see them?” Abeke asked, once the first flurry had ended. She quickly peeked over the log and fired in the direction of their attackers, but nothing seemed to connect. “I don’t want to waste my arrows.”

“We need to keep moving,” Worthy said, his claws bared, ready to strike once given the opportunity. “We’re sitting ducks out here.”

“What do you think, Anka?” Conor said. “Can you hide us all with your chameleon’s powers?”

It took Meilin a moment to realize the woman was shaking her head. “It would be possible ... but we would have to move very slowly. It doesn’t work if we’re zigzagging around the forest, trying to take cover.”

“Let’s just slow down for a moment.” Meilin braced herself against her quarterstaff. “It would be good to know what we’re up against before we make our next move.”

“You know, I would usually agree with you,” Rollan said. “But not when people are shooting at us.”

“We’re fine for the time being,” Meilin said as she considered their surroundings. They seemed to have pretty good cover thanks to the large

overturned log and the dense trees surrounding them, but they were also pinned down, making it impossible for them to escape. The arrows seemed to be coming from directly ahead. She tried spying through the foliage, hoping to catch sight of the black uniforms or metallic neck and wrist braces of the Oathbound, but all she saw was green leaves and brown trees.

Meilin ducked as another arrow landed high above them. She closed her eyes and counted as others fired all around them. “There are at least eight archers.”

“Eight Oathbound? That’s not so bad,” Conor said. “Better than that whole army we faced in Amaya.” Briggan sat by his side, growling toward their unseen attackers. The wolf, like Meilin, preferred more direct combat as well.

“I don’t think we’re up against the Oathbound,” Meilin said. She glanced at the arrow stuck in a tree above them. “Doesn’t that look familiar?”

They all looked up, then at the matching arrow nocked in Abeke’s bow. “It’s the same arrows from the village!” Rollan said. “Do you think it’s the trappers?”

Worthy nodded. “You know, that makes sense. They’re the only people around here that would know this forest well. They’d know exactly where to hide in order to ambush us.”

“I was afraid this would happen,” Rollan said with a sigh. “One of the trappers started questioning me. Asking me about where we’d traveled. I finally told him that we passed through Betarvius—”

Conor and Worthy groaned. Meilin wasn’t sure, but it even looked like Briggan rolled his eyes.

“Yep, that was a mistake,” Worthy finally said. “That place is a ghost town. Completely empty.” He elbowed Rollan. “See, none of this would have happened if you’d taken me.”

“Enough, Worthy,” Conor snapped. “It was an honest mistake. How was he supposed to know ...”

Conor stopped talking, shifting his body so he was turned away from the others. Meilin looked from Conor to Worthy. There was something

else they knew—something more about the village—but neither seemed to want to continue talking.

“Look on the bright side,” Rollan finally said. “At least it’s not the Oathbound out there trying to kill us.” They watched as another arrow soared overhead, settling in the brush far behind them. “These guys aren’t even coming close to hitting us.”

“While this is all interesting, I’m beginning to run out of arrows,” Abeke said, firing another one in the general direction of their attackers. “So maybe there should be less talk about how we got into this mess, and more discussion about how we’re going to escape.”

“Perhaps now is a good time to use the Heart of the Land,” Anka said. As she pointed a translucent finger toward Rollan, it turned brown to match his cloak. “You still have it, correct?”

Rollan nodded. After returning from the market, he had tied the amulet back around his neck with a leather strap, close to his heart. It fell right where his tattoo of Essix usually resided—whenever the falcon decided to go into passive state.

Once a large, scaly black rock, the Heart of the Land was now an amber amulet carved into the shape of a gila monster, one of the most feared and famous spirit animals of ancient Amaya. The amulet possessed great powers, but it could also be dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands.

Rollan pulled the stone amulet from under his shirt. “Any thoughts on what power I should use? Maybe I can create a tunnel like last time.”

“The tree roots are probably too deep,” Abeke said. “Worthy said these trees are hundreds of years old.”

“If not older,” Conor said. “Maybe you can try an earthquake again?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking that starting an earthquake in the middle of a forest isn’t such a good idea,” Rollan quipped. “Unless you want tree branches to rain down from the sky.”

“I wish we could see where those archers are shooting from,” Meilin said. “It’s hard to fight an enemy when you can’t even see them.”

“What about the armor power?” Anka asked. “If we make a run for it, Rollan can take up the rear and block any arrows coming our way.”

Rollan shrugged. “Seems like a good idea to me.”

Meilin shook her head. Something still didn't feel right about this. But she had delayed them for long enough. "Okay, let's go for it."

"Ready, Briggan?" Conor asked. He slid his ax back into his belt, then scratched the large shaggy wolf on the neck. "Stay close to me."

Meilin noticed Abeke whispering something similar to Uraza. Still uneasy about their decision to retreat, Meilin briefly considered calling forth Jhi. In addition to being a healer, the Great Panda also helped Meilin clear her mind—becoming so calm she could see all sides of a problem, and even slowing down the outside world. Meilin was sure that meditating with Jhi would help illuminate what was troubling her. But they didn't have time for that—and the large, lumbering Jhi and her pristine snow-white fur would be a prime target for the archers.

"We'll go during the next wave," Rollan said. Clutching the Heart of the Land tightly in his right hand, he reached out to Meilin and gave her arm a faint squeeze.

"You should leave your pack behind, Rollan," she said. "You'll move faster without it."

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. Plus, we'll need the supplies later."

"But, Rollan ..." She stopped as she heard the buzz of arrows in the air. Rollan must have as well. As he scrambled to his feet, the amulet glowed in his hand, his fingers hardly able to contain the amber light leaking through. He thrust his hand in the air as if he was blocking the volley. The arrows froze, hovering for a second, then silently fell to the ground.

Rollan turned and stared at his friends. "What are you waiting for?" he yelled. "Run!"

Conor, Worthy, and Briggan took off, with Abeke close behind. Meilin couldn't see Anka, but she could hear her running ahead, her boots crunching through the forest foliage. She turned to see Rollan behind her, the amulet still glowing in his hands. He paused as another volley approached, then blocked them again.

"Yikes!" Worthy yelled.

Meilin turned to see the Redcloak leaping out of the way of an arrow. It had barely missed him, instead piercing his cloak. Two more arrows sunk into the ground at his feet.

“More archers!” Conor said, pivoting to the left. “Where did they come from?”

Meilin wondered the same thing. From what it seemed, this new set of archers had been sitting in the trees behind them. But if that were the case, they would have had a clear shot at the group. Why hadn’t they attacked?

“Keep running!” Rollan yelled, blocking more arrows. But this volley, like so many of the others, hadn’t come close to hitting them. Still, the group pivoted again, turning down a small path.

Something about running was helping clear Meilin’s mind. These archers were either the worst shots in all of Erdas ... or they were missing them on purpose! They weren’t trying to kill them. They were trying to flush them out. They were funneling them a certain way....

They were running into a trap!

“Guys! We have to stop running! We have to—”

Suddenly, up ahead, Worthy, Conor, and Briggan yelled as a net sprung up from the ground, surrounding them. They flew into the air, crashing into each other as the net spun on the end of a wobbly evergreen tree.

A few feet away, Uraza yowled as another net ensnared her. The leopard tried to find her footing, but there were too many holes in the net for her to gain her balance. The more she struggled, the more tangled she became.

Abeke skidded to a halt. “Don’t worry, Uraza! I’ll get you out!” She reached for her knife, but then something—Anka, Meilin eventually realized—bumped into Abeke, pushing them both forward. Another net materialized around them, whipping them into the air.

Meilin turned to see Rollan barreling toward her in a full-out sprint. Essix flew above him, her wings spread wide. “Slow down!” Meilin yelled. “It’s a—”

But before she could finish her sentence, a tall, wooden cage, sharpened to pinpoint spikes at the top, sprung up around him. Rollan tried to jump over it, but it was too high, even with his spirit animal’s help.

“Drop your weapon, Greencloak,” a voice said from above. “That is, unless you want a belly full of arrows.”

Meilin dropped her quarterstaff as a group of men slithered out of the trees. They were dressed in brown furs, with green and brown paint over their faces. No wonder Meilin hadn't seen them. They were dressed to blend in perfectly with the forest.

She counted them as they exited the trees. There were at least twenty of them, with more still in the forest. One of the men started walking toward them. She recognized him immediately. He was the large, bearded trapper from the trading post, the one that had been doing the most clapping while she danced.

“Check that one first,” the man said, pointing to Rollan. “It looked like he was holding something. See what it is.”

Rollan held his hands open as two men approached him. They were empty.

“He's clean, Merch,” one of the trappers said to the large, bearded man. “Want us to tie him up anyway?”

“Yep.” Merch was clearly the one in charge. “And use lots of rope.”

“You heard the man,” one of the other trappers said, uncoiling a brown rope from around his shoulder. “Stick out your hands.”

“Come on, guys,” Rollan said, extending his hands through the cage's long vertical bars. “I'm already in a cage. Isn't this a bit overkill.” Rollan winced as they tightened their knots. “I think you're cutting off the blood flow to my fingers.”

“I'll sure the Oathbound will take you, with or without fingers,” Merch replied. “My buddy Cal is already heading back to their camp to let them know that we found you.” Picking up a stick, he walked to the net with Conor, Worthy, and Briggan. “And look what we have here,” he said, poking at them with the stick. “The mighty Briggan, caught in a net. Guess you aren't such a Great Beast after all.”

The wolf snapped at the man. Catching the stick in his strong jaws, Briggan broke off a piece, then hurled it back at him.

“Careful there,” Merch taunted. “The Oathbound woman said she wanted the Greencloaks alive. She didn't mention anything about their spirit animals.” The man spun the net, stopping it once Worthy was in

front of him. “And what exactly are you?” he asked. “Why do your eyes look so funny? And what happened to your hands?”

“Let me out and I’ll give you an up-close demonstration,” Worthy said, holding up his claws. He tried to reach out and swipe the man, but he was too caught up in the net.

Merch smiled. “Why don’t you all put away those precious animals of yours before someone gets hurt?” He poked Briggan again. “Go ahead.”

In a flash, Briggan and Uraza disappeared, while Anka slowly came back into view. Although Meilin didn’t see Essix, she was sure that the bird was there, hidden out of sight. They were probably going to need her help if they hoped to escape.

“And what about you?” the trapper asked, now pointing his stick at Meilin. “Where’s your animal?”

“Already in passive state,” Meilin said, showing off Jhi’s mark on the back of her hand. “Please don’t do this,” she continued. “Whatever reward the Oathbound are offering, we’ll double it.”

He stroked his beard. “Like I could ever trust the word of a Greencloak, especially after the way you all laid waste to Eura.” His lips curled into a snarl as he talked.

Rollan shook his hands, vibrating the walls of his cage. “The Oathbound are nothing but big bullies,” he said. “We Greencloaks have kept the peace for centuries. If they capture us, they’ll split us up and use us as weapons. They’ll have each land fighting against one another.”

“You have the nerve to talk about Greencloaks keeping the peace?” Merch sneered at Rollan. “Were you keeping the peace a few months ago, when the Greencloaks destroyed my village? When Betarvius fell? Or were you off rampaging some other part of the world?” He neared the cage. “Perhaps you were the one controlling the elk that destroyed the mill. Or maybe it was one of your animals that stampeded through the center of town, destroying all our homes. Or maybe you helped demolish our dam, flooding what little remained of our town.” Merch leveled the stick at Rollan. “It was bad enough when the Conquerors came. They stole our animals, seized our supplies. And then, right when we’re trying to rebuild, you Greencloaks came along to finish us off. Betarvius was

founded by my great-great-grandfather. It stood for hundreds of years. And the Greencloaks destroyed it within a matter of hours.”

Meilin glanced at Conor and Worthy. Both their faces were turned to the ground. So that was why they didn’t want to talk about Betarvius. It must have fallen after the Greencloaks were taken by the Wyrms. She knew firsthand of the horrors that could be inflicted by a group of people controlled by the Wyrms—she’d seen how the Many had destroyed everything in their path while she was underground in Sadre. There was no village in all of Erdas that could have withstood the might of a horde controlled by the Wyrms, especially if that horde was made up of warriors like the Greencloaks. The village would have been doomed from the start.

Rollan didn’t speak for a few moments; he must have understood the gravity of what happened in Betarvius as well. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry about that. Really, I am. But the Greencloaks were under the power of something called the Wyrms—”

“Just more Greencloak lies,” Merch said. “We’ve heard rumors that the queen wants the Greencloaks to disband. We stand with her. It is what’s best for Eura.”

Rollan opened his mouth again, but Meilin shook her head, warning him to remain quiet. There was nothing Rollan could say that would soothe the man’s anger. He had lost too much.

“Since you want to do all this talking, why don’t you tell me how you stopped those arrows of ours?” Merch continued. “How did they fall out of the sky like that? It was like they hit an invisible wall or something.” Merch jabbed his stick into Rollan’s side. A flash of pain came across Rollan’s face, but he didn’t yell out. The man poked him again, this time harder. “Come on. Spill it.”

Finally, Rollan spat out, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, you do,” he said. “The woman in black told us specifically to watch out for you. Said you had some type of amulet. Some gift.”

“You must be imagining things,” Rollan said. “Maybe you all just have bad aim.”

That drew an even sharper poke from Merch. “Fine, don’t tell me. The Oathbound will pry it out of you, one way or another. The way I

understand it, the woman leading them, Cordelia the Kind, has a real knack for getting information out of people.” He grinned. “She takes the phrase ‘kill them with kindness’ to a whole new level.”

Now Rollan looked worried. “Okay, how about this. If I tell you where it is, will you let us go?”

The man stroked his beard again. “Maybe.”

“Don’t listen to him, Merch,” one of the other trappers said. “You heard what Cordelia said—”

“We’d be long gone by the time she figured it out,” Merch said. “Think of what we could do with that amulet. We’d be unstoppable. Forget rebuilding Betarvius. We could rule all of Eura!” Merch turned back to Rollan. “So, are you going to tell me or not?”

Rollan opened his mouth, and hesitated.

“Rollan, you can’t!” Meilin yelled. He actually looked like he was considering his offer.

“Why not?” Rollan said. “It’s better in their hands than the Oathbounds’.” Then Rollan smiled and rolled his eyes at her.

It was a signal. Meilin wasn’t sure, but she thought it meant that Rollan wanted her to play along.

“Come on, Meilin, what do you say?” Rollan continued. “We give him the amulet, and he lets us go? Just us two. He can still turn the others over to the Oathbound.”

“Hey!” Worthy yelled from behind her. She turned to see Conor clamping his hand over the spot on Worthy’s mask where his mouth would be. Whatever was happening, Conor wanted it to play out, too.

Meilin took a deep breath. She hoped she was doing what Rollan wanted her to do. “Don’t be ridiculous. Look at this guy,” she said, nodding toward Merch. “You think he stands a chance against the Oathbound? He could hardly fight his way out of a puddle of water.”

Rollan smiled and offered her the slightest of nods. “Meilin, don’t fight me on this. It’s the only way to save us.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. Us,” he said. “I’m not leaving without you.”

She turned away from him and jutted her chin in the air. “Then I guess we’re not leaving.”

Rollan sighed. “Merch, buddy, do you mind bringing her over here? Let me talk to her.”

Merch cast his eyes upon Meilin, like he was studying her. Like he was trying to figure out if she was really serious.

“Just let me talk to her,” Rollan repeated. “Once I get her to change her mind, I’ll tell you where the amulet is.”

Merch let out a deep grunt, then pointed to two nearby trappers. “Take her over there,” he said. “Tie her up to the cage. But watch out for her. She’s a fighter. I can see it in her eyes.”

Meilin tried to hold her hands apart to keep the rope loose, but this trapper was an expert at knots. He triple-tied the cords, squeezing her hands uncomfortably tight together.

The two trappers then dragged Meilin to the cage. Meilin pulled against them, but they were too strong. They tied her to the side, face-to-face with Rollan.

“Um, how about a little privacy,” Rollan said, shooing the men away.

Merch sighed. “Step away, boys. But you two better make it quick.”

Rollan shifted forward. They were probably close enough to kiss, although Meilin wasn’t trying to think about that.

“If I had known we’d be this close, I would have brushed my teeth,” Rollan whispered.

“You can’t help yourself, can you? You just can’t let the opportunity for a joke to pass you by.” Then she smiled. “So what’s the plan?”

“Not sure. I’m making this up as I go along.”

“Were you at least able to get the amulet to Essix before you were caught?”

“Yeah ... not quite,” he whispered.

“Rollan!” she hissed. “Really?”

“I was hoping to, but Essix was too far away when the cage trapped me. But I was able to slip it into my boot. It’s wedged against my ankle. I originally wanted Essix to create a diversion so I could reach it ...”

“But then you had to mouth off and get yourself tied to the cage.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“I don’t have forever,” Merch called out. “You going to tell us where the amulet is or not?”

“Give me another minute,” Rollan said. “I’ve almost got her convinced.” Rollan slid even closer to Meilin. “If I was able to get the men away from here, and if Essix created enough of a distraction, do you think you and that big panda of yours can break us out of here?”

“Given our current predicament, I don’t see many other options.” She shook her head. “But remind me to talk to you about escape strategies.”

Rollan smiled, then turned to Merch. “Okay, I’ll tell you where it is,” he said. “I dropped it in the forest.”

Merch threw his stick to the ground. “Boy, is that all you have to say?” Merch pulled a sword from his belt and advanced toward them. It was the falchion, the very sword that Meilin had been drooling over at the trading post. “You tell me where the amulet is, or I start slicing fingers off.” He pointed the sword at Meilin. “And I’ll start with Twinkle Toes.”

“Seriously, it’s in the forest,” Rollan said “About one hundred paces back. By the oak tree with the large knot in the center. You’ll find it if you look hard enough.”

Merch glared at both of them. “You’d better not be lying to me. You and your friends’ lives depend on it.” Merch turned to a small group of nearby men. “You all stay here and keep watch. You others come with me. We need to find that amulet before the Oathbound get here.”

Meilin waited until most of the men had disappeared into the forest. Only seven remained, although they were all armed. She looked at Rollan. “Is Essix ready?” she whispered.

“Just give her a signal, and she’ll swoop in.”

Meilin closed her eyes. In a flash, Jhi appeared beside her. The panda yawned as she took in her surroundings.

“Whoa!” one of the trappers yelled. “Is that a panda?”

“Get it!” another said.

“Don’t worry about me,” Meilin said to Jhi as the panda began to chew on her rope bonds. “Stop them first.”

The panda nodded, turned, and reared up on her hind legs. She roared loud enough to make the birds in the trees take flight. Then she dropped to all fours and charged the men.

The three trappers nearest to them paused for a moment, seemingly frozen by her size, then continued running toward her. They brandished axes and daggers, swinging them wildly in the air as they approached the panda. Meilin knew Jhi could hold her own against the men, but she still worried for her partner. Jhi wasn't the fighting type, though thankfully these men didn't know that.

But just as the men reached Jhi, Essix soared down from a nearby tree. She dove toward the man with a dagger, raking her talons across his face. With streaks of blood across his cheek, he dropped his blade and blindly waved his arms around his head, trying to keep the gyrfalcon away.

"Go, Essix! Get him!" Rollan yelled. "That's what happens when you mess with a Greencloak!"

Meanwhile, Jhi swiped her paws at one of the other trappers, batting him to the ground. She roared again, her bellow loud enough to make the last man drop his weapon and cower before her. But Jhi and Essix didn't have time to waste on those men. Other trappers were already rushing toward the animals. But unlike the first group, these carried crossbows and bolts. Before they could ready their weapons, however, Uraza and Briggan joined the fray, clawing and biting at the men, ripping the crossbows from their hands.

"Hurry up," Rollan said. "I hear the others coming back."

Meilin closed her eyes. She allowed herself to connect to Jhi—to have their thoughts and strengths and souls intertwined. She felt Jhi's strength surge through her. Then she lowered her shoulder, squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, and rammed into the cage. It began to splinter. She rammed it again, this time breaking the wooden bars.

Although her hands were still tied, she could move more freely. She reached through the cage and grabbed Rollan's boot. "Hold on," she said, ripping it from his leg.

"Ouch!" he yelled. "You could be a little gentler, you know."

"Pain—it's an occupational hazard." She turned over the boot, and the Heart of the Land fell to the ground. She picked it up, and tried to hand it to Rollan.

"I can't take it," he said. "My hands are bound too tightly. You use it."

Meilin looked at the small stone. She curled her fingers around the amulet, then thrust it into the sky. It began to give off its bright amber glow.

“Um, Meilin,” Rollan began. “What exactly are you about to do?”

“What do you think?”

“Remember what we were talking about a little while ago,” he said, his words faster. “About how earthquakes weren’t so good when surrounded by huge trees and thick branches and—”

“Brace yourself!” she yelled. She struck her hand hard against the ground.

Thunder boomed, and a shock wave radiated from Meilin on out. The trappers bobbed, trying to keep their balance as the earth rolled underneath them. All around them, branches and tree trunks creaked and snapped upon being hit by vibration after vibration.

Meilin leaped out of the way right before a tree limb crashed to the ground, barely missing her. Likewise, the branches holding the others came crashing down.

“Ouch,” Conor yelled.

“Oomp,” said Worthy.

“Sorry,” Meilin muttered. She took in the scene. While the trappers wobbled to their feet, Abeke and Conor began cutting through their thick ropes. But they were slow, and the trappers were already lurching forward.

“Hit them again!” Rollan yelled, bracing himself against the cage.

Meilin struck her fist back into the ground. More trees fell, and the trappers once again stumbled off their feet. Abeke grabbed Anka and rolled to her left as a huge tree limb came thundering down. Across from them, Worthy and Conor had worked their way out of their net, and were now getting to their feet.

Worthy ran toward a group of men. “You guys like to shoot arrows from afar. Let’s see how you do up close.” He leaped at the men, landing on one of their backs and flipping him over. “I’ll take care of these men,” Worthy said. “Free Abeke and Anka!”

Conor nodded, then rushed to help the others. Meilin started to run toward them as well, but stopped as she heard footsteps approaching.

“Meilin, behind you!” Rollan yelled.

She turned to see the rest of the hunters rushing toward her. Merch was in the front, waving his sword high in the air.

“Jhi, help me!” Meilin called out as she charged the men. Feeling Jhi’s power coursing through her body once again, she leaped into the air and landed a roundhouse kick squarely on one of the trapper’s jaws. Then she spun around, kicking two more to the ground.

Essix appeared beside her, taking out another trapper before he could fire his arrow at her. Then there was Jhi, back on her hind paws, swatting down the men as soon as they drew near. Her coat was wet with blood—Meilin hoped that it belonged to one of the attackers, not the panda.

“Yikes,” Rollan yelled. “A little help here?”

Meilin turned to see Merch and two trappers running toward Rollan. The boy, still tied to the cage, was defenseless.

Meilin took off, channeling Jhi’s massive power into her legs. Using a fallen tree, she catapulted herself over the men, landing between them and Rollan.

Merch seemed surprised for a moment, then his mouth curled into a snarl. “Doesn’t seem fair, does it?” Merch said, waving the sword at her. “Us with the weapons and you with nothing but your hands tied together.”

“Yeah, it’s not fair. For you!” Jumping into the air, she kneed the first trapper in the nose, then kicked him in the chest, hurling him backward. She flipped back to her feet and charged toward the second man. But before she could reach him, an arrow whizzed past Meilin and sunk into his shoulder. A second later Uraza was at the man’s side, clamping her sharp teeth into his leg.

Meilin turned quickly to thank Abeke, then focused on Merch. “That’s a nice sword,” she said. “Do you mind if I take it?”

“Sure, you can have it as soon as I run you through with it.” Merch lurched forward, and Meilin expertly dodged his thrust. Meilin grabbed his arm, spun around, and flipped him over her shoulder.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying upside down against what remained of the wooden cage. And Meilin was holding the falchion between her still-tied hands.

“What were you saying about this sword?” she asked, a large smile on her face.

Around her, most of the other trappers had either given up or had fled into the forest. She waved at Jhi as the Great Panda sat on top of one of the trappers, stopping him from trying to escape.

“Now that’s the kind of fighting I like,” Rollan said. “The type where I don’t have to lift a finger.” He jutted his hands toward Meilin. “But if you don’t mind, I would really appreciate it if you got me out of here.”

She opened her hand, revealing the Heart of the Land. “Want me to use the earthquake powers one last—”

“No!” Rollan, Conor, and Abeke yelled at the same time.

She laughed. “Come on, guys. Can’t you take a joke?”

Rollan rolled his eyes as Conor began to cut him free. “You stick to fighting. I’ll handle the jokes.”



TRUNSWICK

AFTER TALKING IT OVER, THEY DECIDED TO TIE UP the remaining trappers. Conor didn't like this idea—really, no one did—but they didn't have any other options. Using the wood and nets from their own traps, Conor and the others created a large cage to hold them all. The men were cramped, but it would keep them safe from any dangerous beasts wandering through the forest. Based on what the trappers had told them, it would take their companion, Cal, a full day to reach the Oathbound campsite. Adding another day for the return trip, and Conor figured that they only had a two-day head start. It would be risky, but they decided to travel during the daytime—which meant traveling with their spirit animals in passive state. Conor knew Briggan enjoyed roaming the countryside, but they had to make it to Trunswick before the Oathbound found them.

Just before they were about to leave, Conor walked over to Merch, the leader of the trappers.

“You can't leave us out here like this,” Merch said. “We'll starve.”

“We left you plenty of food and water,” Conor said. “Your friend will be back soon.”

“But what if he's delayed? What if he's lost?”

“Don't worry. Someone will come for you.” Conor knelt in front of the man. “Also, I just wanted to say, I'm sorry for your loss,” he added quietly. “How many people survived?”

Merch's eyes softened, if only for an instant. "Just the handful of us trappers who were out in the forest." Then just as quickly, his gaze turned cold. "Tell me the truth. Were you there?"

"I was not there," Conor said. But he may as well have been. He, like all the other infected people, had done terrible things. Sure, he could argue that it wasn't his fault, but that didn't undo the pain he and the other Greencloaks had inflicted on innocent people.

"I know you don't trust us," Conor said. "But I promise, the Greencloaks will make this right. We won't rest until we've helped rebuild all of Erdas, including Betarvius."

"I've seen your help," Merch said. He spat onto the ground, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll take my chances with the Oathbound."

"Merch, just listen to me—"

"Conor," Abeke said. Like usual, he hadn't heard her approach. "We need to go." She placed her hand gently on his shoulder. "Come."

"I'm sorry," Conor said one last time as Merch turned away from him. He stood and picked up his ax. It felt much too heavy in his hands.

"Conor, I know you feel sorry for these men, but we have to keep focused on our mission," Abeke said as they went to join the others.

"Yeah," Conor said. "It's just that, ever since I was a little kid, I've always wanted people to like me. I hated disappointing anyone—even Worthy, when I was his servant. I wish there was something I could say to Merch to make him feel better."

"Hopefully his heart will soften. But it will take time. Years, perhaps. But just because his heart is made of stone doesn't mean yours needs to carry the same weight."

"Thanks, Abeke. You really are a true friend."

"And I'll *always* be your friend," she said. "Now come. We have to move quickly."

They started off toward Trunswick, now taking the main roads. They knew they'd encounter more people, but it would cut their travel time by a full day. At night, they stopped long enough for a few hours of sleep, then kept moving, using the moon to illuminate their way. Instead of

cooking their meals, they ate cold roots and plants that they dug up along the roadside.

Conor's heart swelled the closer they got to town. He found himself marveling at childhood landmarks—the creek his father tossed him into when he was first learning to swim. The hill he often took his sheep to for grazing. The fence he mended for the Widow Tomball for a few coins—which he promptly returned to her after feeling guilty for taking her money.

Worthy wouldn't admit it, but he was clearly growing nervous about returning home. Instead of becoming excited and speeding their journey homeward along, Worthy kept slowing down. He complained about entering the town at night—said he didn't want to get into a skirmish with the gate sentries. Then he protested about their dinner of wild mushrooms, demanding that they stop and cook a proper meal.

Finally, after he stalled the group because he thought he'd sprained his ankle on a tree root, Conor pulled Worthy to the side, trailing behind the others. "What's wrong? Aren't you excited to go home?"

"Of course I am," Worthy hissed back. "But as soon as we reach Trunswick, they'll find out that I don't exactly know where the records are."

Conor snapped his fingers. He'd forgotten about his conversation with Worthy on the ship. "You have to tell them," Conor said. "Now. And if you don't, I will."

"But they'll hate me," Worthy said.

"Trust me, they'll dislike you even more the longer you deceive them."

"I'll tell them. I promise. As soon as we're safely inside the city." Worthy pressed his hands together and fell to his knees. "Please, Conor. Let me just have a little bit longer."

Conor stared at Worthy, then slowly shook his head. He really was too nice sometimes. "Fine," he said. "But you have to tell them as soon as we reach the manor."

"Deal!" Worthy said. He sprung to his feet, and they joined up with the others.

“What should we expect when we’re there?” Meilin asked. “Did the Greencloaks attack your town as well?”

Conor shook his head. “According to my parents, the fighting stopped just south of Trunswick. That’s when Zerif called all the Greencloaks back for the final battle.”

“Anything else we need to know about Trunswick?” Rollan asked. “After my last slipup about towns in the area, I want to be prepared.”

Worthy shrugged. “Um, no ... I don’t think there’s anything else you need to know. Everything’s just fine. Nothing strange happened. Nothing burned down or anything like that.”

“Huh?” Anka asked. “Worthy, what are you talking about?”

“He’s just nervous about seeing his brother,” Conor said, stepping in for Worthy. “He’s always a bit of a mess when he’s excited.”

Rollan snorted. “Then he must *always* be excited.” He turned to Conor. “Are you going to take us in by the secret back entrance? It’s pretty close to the castle, right?” Conor hadn’t realized that Rollan had remembered that. They’d traveled to Trunswick while on a mission to find Rumfuss the Boar; it had been Conor’s first time back in the town since becoming a Greencloak. He’d wanted to impress Rollan, but had ended up being embarrassed in front of him, thanks to Devin and his father. Then, to make matters worse, the Earl of Trunswick threw them in jail.

He hoped this visit ended on a better note.

“Worthy may have a better way for us to enter,” Conor eventually said. “He knows the town better than I do. He’ll take the lead once we’re there.”

Worthy jumped in the air, waving his fists. “Don’t worry, guys. You can depend on me!”

Meilin pointed her new sword at Worthy’s feet. “I thought you sprained your ankle,” she said. “Did it magically heal up?”

“Oops,” Worthy said as he immediately began limping again. “It comes and goes. Joints are tricky like that.”

Rollan shook his head. “Worthy, you’re favoring the wrong foot.”



It was well past midnight when they first caught sight of the town. Trunswick sat on a large hill, its sandy-colored walls reaching high to the sky.

“That’s funny,” Rollan said. “I would have thought that we’d be able to see the castle from here.”

“Ah, it must be too cloudy,” Worthy mumbled.

Conor winced as Rollan looked up. A bright moon hung overhead. There wasn’t a cloud in sight.

“Now follow me,” Worthy continued, stepping off the path. “I know another way past the town gates.”

Worthy led them through an abandoned field until they reached a small drainage pipe at the base of the wall. After a few tugs, he and Conor were able to pry the small iron gate from the pipe opening. They crept into the city, single file. A few torchlights illuminated the streets, but otherwise the town was silent.

“No guards?” Rollan asked. “That’s unusual.”

Conor had to agree. Usually, there was always a sentry or guard roaming the streets or keeping watch at one of the walled towers. But now, everything seemed silent.

“We lost a lot of our guards right after the war,” Worthy said. “Father wasn’t always the best at paying people fairly.”

They turned a corner, then froze, staring speechlessly at the shell of a building standing before them. Finally, Meilin said, “Um, Worthy, what happened to your castle?”

Trunswick Manor—once five stories high with massive sandstone towers that pierced the sky—was now a lump of charred bricks, crumbling walls, and splintered wood. One tower remained, half burned and leaning heavily against the manor’s interior walls. A tattered, soot-coated blue flag flew from the tower, one of the only reminders that this had once been the mighty structure. Miraculously, the giant double-doored entrance and archway remained standing, though the walls surrounding it had long fallen. The manor grounds, once immaculate, were now overrun with vines and thorny bushes.

Worthy let out a long, deep breath. “There was a little accident.”

“That doesn’t look little,” Meilin said.

“So where exactly are we going?” Anka asked. “Worthy, if you’re just leading us on some wild-goose chase—”

“I’m not! I promise.” He started off toward the outskirts of the walled town. “Follow me. We’ll be at Dawson’s, um, *estate* soon.”

Worthy led them through the town’s empty dirt streets, eventually stopping at a small wooden cottage.

“This is the new Trunswick Manor?” Conor asked. He knew that Dawson was no longer living in the castle, but he hadn’t expected him to be living in a *cottage*. It wasn’t much bigger than his family’s home out in the countryside.

Worthy softly knocked on the door using a long, intricate rhythm. When no one answered, he repeated the knock.

Conor could see what looked like a candle illuminating the window beside the door. “Who is it?” someone from inside called.

“Tellun the Elk,” Worthy said. “Who else do you think would use our secret knock?”

The door flung open. Dawson stood in a long wool nightgown, holding a candle. Rumfuss the Boar stood beside him, his tusks white and pointed.

“Devin!” Dawson placed the candle on an end table, then leaped forward, embracing his brother in a long hug. “I can’t believe you’re here!” He pulled back to get a good look at Worthy, then hugged him again.

Unlike everyone else that they had encountered, Dawson didn’t seem frightened or shocked by his brother’s new look. He loved his brother, no matter what.

“I’m all for family reunions,” Rollan said. “But can we take this inside? We do have a bounty out for our heads, after all.”

“Yes, of course,” Dawson said, leading them in. Once inside, he double-bolted the door. Conor and Abeke released their spirit animals. Briggan and Uraza immediately went to Rumfuss, sniffing him and nudging him with their noses. Meilin then released Jhi, but instead of walking toward the others, she sat down and began to eat Dawson’s spruce plant.

“Sorry about that,” Meilin said. “It’s been a while since she’s eaten.”

Dawson shrugged. “No problem. It was my father’s plant anyway.” He turned as something moved behind him. “There’s another old friend here that wants to say hello.”

A small black cat leaped onto a low bookshelf behind Dawson.

“Kunaya!” Abeke said. The cat sprinted nimbly along the edge of the shelf then jumped into Abeke’s outstretched arms. Uraza looked at the cat and let off a low growl.

“Don’t be jealous,” Abeke said as she stroked the cat. “Kunaya’s an old friend of ours.”

Worthy walked over to take a peek at the cat, when she suddenly meowed and jumped into his arms. “It looks like you two have a history as well,” Abeke said.

“A little,” Worthy said. Cradling the cat, he sat down in one of the few chairs in the room. “I like what you’ve done with the place, Dawson.” He nodded toward a blue tapestry hanging on the wall. “You were able to save the family crest.”

“It was about the only thing that didn’t burn down,” Dawson said. “Though it took me three hours to scrub all the soot and smoke out of the fabric.”

“Speaking of that,” Meilin began. “Maybe now would be a good time to explain what’s been happening around here.” She cut her eyes to Worthy. “Apparently, someone’s been keeping a few secrets from us.”

“So, where to begin ...” Dawson said. “As I’m sure you realized, Trunswick Castle is gone. Devin burned it down the last time he was here.”

“It wasn’t my fault.” He paused as he placed the black cat on the floor. “Well, it wasn’t *completely* my fault. I was having a bad day.”

“This was after he started a riot, of course,” Dawson said.

Worthy hesitated. “Okay, that one really was all my fault. But I did it for a good reason.”

Meilin leaned forward. “Why didn’t you tell us any of this?”

He shrugged. “I wanted you to like me. And I didn’t keep it from everyone,” he said. “I told Conor.”

Conor’s friends all leveled their gazes on him. “Thanks, Worthy,” Conor mumbled. It was just like Worthy to pull Conor into his web of

lies. “I’m sorry, guys. I probably should have made Worthy tell you all. But I still think coming to Trunswick was the right call.”

“Perhaps,” Meilin said. “But you should have trusted us to make that decision together. With *all* the information.”

Conor wished he could disappear. He was no longer a servant to the Trunswicks, but he was still getting into trouble because of them.

“We have to remember, we’re all fighting for the same thing,” Abeke said. “So from now on, no more secrets. Agreed? Unified until the end.”

They all nodded. Conor expected Rollan to crack a joke or two, but he remained silent, instead rubbing his brown cloak between his fingers.

“Dawson, were you able to save anything else from the castle?” Worthy asked. “Down in the lower levels, there were some records on old parchment. I looked through them once, when father was away. I thought I saw something about a powerful sword there. The Wildcat’s Claw. Our family sword was modeled after it.”

“A lot of those records were damaged by the water used to put out the fire,” Dawson said. “We took everything we could salvage and moved it to the Howling House. That’s probably where you should start.”

“The Howling House!” Rollan yelled. “I have to go back to *that* place?”

“What’s the Howling House?” Anka asked. Conor looked around until he noticed the blurry shape leaning against the door.

“It’s a prison where they keep innocent people,” Rollan said. “Cat-boy over there threw me and Conor into it the first time I visited this place.”

“Sorry about that,” Worthy said. “To be fair, I really did hate Greencloaks at the time. You guys were just so ... *smug*. It wasn’t fair.”

“The Howling House *was* where we kept people affected by bonding sickness,” Dawson said. “But we don’t use it that way anymore. We have no need for it, since there’s no more bonding sickness. Plus, we don’t exactly have the funds for its upkeep.” He turned to his brother. “Have you heard about father?”

The air seemed to escape from the room. “What’s wrong?” Worthy asked quietly. “Is he ... dead?”

Dawson shook his head. “No, but after you hear this, you might wish he was. He abandoned the town—and our family—taking every coin, gem, and valuable he could find with him. The town is broke, but we *are* rebuilding ... slowly. Our military is gone, now replaced by a militia made up of farmers and other townsfolk. Mother and Daphne have decided not to return, and with you off helping the Redcloaks, the citizens chose *me* as the new Earl of Trunswick.” Dawson sighed, looking older and wearier than Conor had ever believed he could. “At this point I’m mostly a figurehead, but I’ll do everything in my power to help our people.”

Dawson had always been the kindest member of his family. He had treated Conor with respect, even when Conor was just a lowly servant boy. Dawson was young, but of all the Trunswicks, he was the right person to lead the town.

“Why you?” Worthy asked. “With the way father disgraced our family and fled the town, why would they pick *any* Trunswick to serve as earl? I mean, I’m sure you’ll do the best you can, but you don’t know the first thing about running a city. You’re just a kid.”

Dawson stood taller as he crossed his arms. “You’re a kid, too. You all are. But that doesn’t stop you from doing your duty, does it?” He relaxed a little as Rumfuss hoofed over to him. “And to be honest, I think it has more to do with Rumfuss than my amazing leadership skills. His name carries way more weight than ours right now.”

Beside Dawson, the Great Boar snuffled proudly.

“But there’s one other problem,” Dawson said, sinking into the other chair in the room. “You’re all wanted criminals. According to the rumors, you assassinated the Emperor of Zhong.”

“We didn’t kill him,” Conor said. “He was murdered by people pretending to be Greencloaks.”

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what the public perception of Greencloaks is right now.” Dawson’s gaze became sharp. In a moment, he looked as shrewd as his father. “There’s word that the queen wants to dismantle your order. She says the Marked would be of better use in service to their respective lands.”

“And what do you think?” Conor asked.

Dawson leaned over and patted Rumfuss on the back. The boar grunted, then rolled over on his back so the boy could reach his stomach. “I’ve seen firsthand what the Wyrms did. I also saw how you Greencloaks fought against it. I stand with you. You have my full support.”

Worthy pulled his cloak around him. “Don’t forget, me and the Redcloaks were there, too.”

Dawson laughed. “Of course. The Wyrms wouldn’t have been defeated without the Redcloaks.”

Worthy sat up in his chair. “Do the townsfolk know that I’m a Redcloak?” There was an air of hope in his voice. “Do they know what I did to help save the world?”

Dawson rubbed the back of his head as he sighed. “Devin, I’ll always see you as a hero. But I can’t speak for the rest of the town. You were cruel to a lot of people. You became even more of a bully when you obtained that fake spirit animal. And then, when you finally returned home with your tail between your legs—no pun intended—you started a riot right in the middle of the square.”

“I had a good reason,” Worthy said. “I was trying to save a defenseless woman.”

Abeke had picked up Kunaya and was now stroking the cat again. “You don’t have to lie to us anymore, Worthy,” she said. “You’ve proven yourself. You don’t have to boast about your deeds.”

“Yeah,” Rollan said. “Everyone makes mistakes. Even me, every once in a while.”

“I’m not lying!” Worthy yelled. “I really was trying to save a woman! She was in the stocks in the square.” He turned to his brother. “Tell them, Dawson.”

His brother shrugged. “The way I heard it, the people began to riot because you were boasting about father’s wealth.”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Worthy said. “I mean, yes, it was, but I was saying all that on purpose. I was trying to free the woman—”

“As interesting as this sounds, we should probably head to the Howling House,” Meilin said. “We’ve already wasted enough time.”

“It’s too late to go now,” Dawson said. “The sun will be rising in less than an hour. The militia will start their first patrol soon.” He rose and

opened the closer of two doors. A cramped bedroom waited within. “You all can stay here for now. It’ll be a tight fit, but it should serve you well enough. Tomorrow night, you can sneak to the Howling House to find what you need.”

Conor looked out of the window. The darkness was fading away. In another hour, his parents would be awake, tending to their animals.

“Hey, Worthy, can I talk to you for a second?” Rollan asked, walking toward the bedroom. He was carrying his large pack. “I want to get your, um, opinion on something really quick.”

Meilin and Abeke looked at each other as the two boys disappeared into the room. “I don’t even want to know what that’s about,” Meilin said.

Conor crossed the room then knelt beside Dawson. Rumfuss huffed as Conor entered their space. “Do you think it’s safe enough for me to visit my family?” Conor asked.

Dawson shook his head. “Sorry, Conor. That would be too risky. But I just saw them last week. They’re doing well. Your brothers are good shepherds.” Dawson tilted his head. “You favor your oldest brother quite a bit. His face is a little rounder, though.” Dawson looked at the ground for a moment, then back up. “I try to look out for your family as much as I can. It’s the least I can do.” He suddenly grabbed Conor’s hand. “Conor, can you ever forgive me for deceiving you like that?”

Conor frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The letter,” he said softly. “Remember the letter about your mother? And the Iron Boar?”

As soon as Dawson mentioned the Iron Boar, Conor knew exactly what he meant. Conor and his friends had successfully located Rumfuss’s Iron Boar talisman, a mystic item that granted the wearer an almost impenetrable armor-like skin. It was a power similar to the gila monster’s amulet, Conor thought. But then the Earl of Trunswick threatened Conor’s mother, forcing him to turn over the Iron Boar for her safety. Dawson had been the one to deliver his father’s demands.

Conor had never been more ashamed of himself as he turned over the talisman for his mother’s safety. He’d betrayed his friends, and the green cloak he was so proud to wear.

“There isn’t a day that’s passed where I didn’t wish I could go back and change things,” Dawson said. “I should have tried to help you. I should have pushed back against my father.”

“We’ve both made mistakes,” Conor said. “But now’s our chance for us to redeem ourselves.”

Dawson seemed comforted by this. Surprisingly, so was Conor.



RACE AGAINST THE MILITIA

ABEKE AND THE OTHERS SPENT MOST OF THE DAY trying to rest. Conor, Worthy, and Rollan had bunked in the room with Dawson, leaving Abeke, Meilin, and Anka to share the other small room. They had allowed Anka to take the bed and had used Dawson's extra quilts to cushion the wooden floor. It wasn't the most comfortable of sleeping arrangements, but it was much better than the cold, unforgiving ground along Eura's country roads.

The sun had set an hour ago. Now they were just waiting for the last of the shops to close in the market. They wanted the streets as empty as possible before they started the trek to the Howling House.

Abeke counted and organized the arrows in her remaining quiver while Meilin finished her training lesson with Anka. They had been working on punching techniques. Meilin was trying to get Anka to step forward while delivering her punch, as a way to maximize her power. Anka kept doing the opposite, however, punching while rocking backward on her heels. As they trained, Abeke realized this was one of the few times she'd had a chance to study Anka—she was always so hard to see with her chameleon powers. She wasn't the best warrior by a long shot, but Meilin seemed determined to train her. However, what

Anka lacked in fighting skills she more than made up for with stealth. Even with the help of Uraza's heightened senses, it often took Abeke a few moments to locate Anka when she was invisible.

There was a soft knock on the door, and a moment later, Rollan pushed it open. "You all should come out and hear this for yourselves," he said. "It's important."

Anka and Meilin bowed toward each other, finishing their sparring. In a flash, Anka's chameleon appeared on her shoulder. The green animal blinked his wide, bulging eyes a few times as he took in his surroundings. Then, as he scampered along Anka's collarbone, the animal slowly faded to green and brown, matching the wall behind them. A few seconds later, Anka faded away into a similar wavy haze.

They entered the main room to see Dawson and the others standing around the table. A brown parchment stretched out across the tabletop.

"We've got trouble," Dawson said. "According to some of the shopkeepers, soldiers in black uniforms were in the city, looking for five renegade Greencloaks and a mysterious warrior in red."

"The Oathbound caught up with us sooner than I thought," Worthy said. He read the parchment again and stroked his chin. "At least they called me a warrior."

"The woman in charge was offering a hefty reward," Dawson continued. "Enough to feed some families for half a year, if not longer."

"Did they leave?" Meilin asked.

"About an hour ago," Dawson said. "They were heading west, along the river. But I'd bet all the bristles on Rumfuss's back that they'll return tomorrow. Probably with more soldiers." Rumfuss burrowed between Dawson's legs and settled underneath the table. "Understandably, the captain of the militia is worried. She's requested more militiamen to patrol the streets tonight. I could try to talk her out of it, but that would cause more suspicion."

Abeke ran her finger along the edge of her bow. "So either we remain in hiding for a few days until things calm down, or we take our chances and go now."

"I think we should go," Meilin said. "We can't afford to wait. The risk for failure is too great."

The others nodded in agreement.

“It’ll be difficult to hide all six of us,” Anka said. “Especially if we’re moving.”

“Then we should split up,” Abeke said. “Anka will hide as many as she can, and the rest of us will follow.”

“But what about all that talk about being united?” Worthy asked.

“United in our duty to one another and to the Greencloaks.” Abeke paused as she noticed Worthy’s arms were crossed peevishly. “I mean, Greencloaks *and* Redcloaks.” Seeing him relax, she continued. “United in our mission ... but not necessarily in *how* we execute that mission.”

“Conor and Worthy, you should go with Anka,” Meilin said. “We can’t risk anyone recognizing you.”

Conor rolled up his sleeve and stretched out his bare arm. “Come on, Briggan. Best go into passive.” The wolf glanced at Conor and gave a soft whimper. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. I’ll let you back out as soon as we get to the Howling House.” The wolf stood up, shaking fur across everyone. The room flashed, and Briggan disappeared onto Conor’s arm.

Uraza paused from cleaning her paws with her tongue to look at Abeke. She blinked her purple eyes at her inquisitively. “Don’t worry; you don’t have to go into passive state. At least, not yet,” Abeke said.

Conor slipped on the coat he’d borrowed from Dawson. It was a little snug, but would have to do. “Rollan, you’d better come with us, too, just to be on the safe side. People may remember you from the last time that you were here with me.”

Rollan’s shoulders sagged, but he nodded. Everyone knew he’d rather travel with Meilin. He picked up his brown cloak—now covered with Briggan’s excess fur—and fastened it around his neck. “You don’t ever hear anyone complaining about a falcon shedding,” he mumbled.

“We’ll meet you as soon as we can,” Meilin said. She picked up her quarterstaff and offered it to Anka. “You should carry a weapon. Just remember our training and you’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.” As Anka took it, the wooden staff turned invisible. “You guys ready?” she asked.

Rollan, Conor, and Worthy nodded. A few seconds later, they disappeared before Abeke's eyes.

"Whoa!" Dawson looked at Rumfuss. "We've got to get some cool tricks like that."

"You'll discover even more powers, in time," Abeke said. "If you joined the Greencloaks, we could help you with your training."

Dawson hesitated, then said, "Thank you for the offer, but my place is here in Trunswick."

"Yeah, and if he joins anything, it'll be the Redcloaks!" Worthy said.

"Okay, enough talking," Anka said. The door slowly opened. "See you soon."

They listened as four sets of footsteps exited the house. Then the door closed shut.

Dawson stood in the middle of the room shaking his head. "How do you guys get used to that? That was awesome."

"Believe me, we've seen stranger." Meilin slid the falchion out of its scabbard and inspected the blade. "What's the best way to get to the Howling House?"

"The most direct way is straight through town. It's right past the castle. Or what's left of the castle." Dawson opened the door again and peeked out. "Okay, the coast is clear. You can go."

"We should take the rooftops," Meilin said. "It'll be easier to avoid the militia."

Abeke and Meilin quickly slipped out of the cottage and stepped into an empty alleyway. Meilin looked up and measured the distance. "I could make it up there on my own, but a little help never hurt." Moments later, Jhi appeared by Meilin's side. She nuzzled the animal's snout. "How about it, Jhi? Care to give me a little power boost?"

Both Meilin and Jhi closed their eyes, almost as if they were in a trance. Seconds later, Meilin exploded into a run. She leaped against the wall of the first building, letting her foot hit the side of the fading brick, then pivoted and launched herself toward the other building. She went like this back and forth until she reached the top.

She leaned over the edge, then curtsied for Abeke.

Abeke walked over to the Great Panda as she sat there, looking up at Meilin. “Are you jumping up there as well, Jhi?”

Meilin laughed as she stretched out her arms. “She would much rather take the easy way up,” she said, calling back Jhi.

Abeke let her fingers run along the back of Uraza’s lush fur. “Come on, Uraza. We can do better than that, right?” And then, as the leopard’s power coursed between them, they took off up the wall.



Abeke loved running across the rooftops with Uraza on her heels. It wasn’t the plains of the savannah outside of her village in Nilo, but she was still having a blast. The wind stirred around them, making it almost feel like they were in an empty field instead of a walled city. After so much fighting and seriousness, it was good to just let loose and run.

Even without her spirit animal aiding her, Meilin was doing an excellent job of keeping up. The girl even did a couple of flips as she jumped across some alleyways—probably just to show off, like Worthy had done in the forest. Abeke hadn’t minded then, and she didn’t mind now. After so much fighting, they could all use a little fun.

Eventually, Abeke and Meilin traveled as far as they could above the city. In the distance, past the charred, crumbling remains of Trunswick Castle, stood the Howling House.

“We won’t have any cover until we get to the castle,” Abeke said.

Meilin nodded as she surveyed the area around them. “I don’t see any militia. I think we should chance it.”

They shinnied down the side of the building, then took off across the open street. They had almost reached the castle grounds when Abeke heard footsteps behind them.

“Hey! Stop there!” a man yelled. He held a lantern in one hand and a sword in the other. Two other men chased behind him. Their blue tunics matched the colors of the city crest.

“Almost made it,” Meilin said. “Now what?”

“Maybe we could lose him in the castle,” Abeke offered.

The girls sprinted across the overgrown lawn, leaping over blackened stone boulders and charred wood. They scurried over a fallen column,

past the stone archway, and raced inside the castle walls. A long, winding staircase stood before them. The staircase looked like it was made of brass, but there was too much ash coating it to know for sure.

“That way,” Meilin said, rushing up the stairs to what remained of the second floor. “They’d be fools to follow us up here.”

The steps creaked and groaned underneath them as they neared the top landing. Abeke was sure they would buckle any second. “Um, now who exactly are the fools again?” Abeke asked. Taking the last three steps in one bound, she landed heavily on the second floor, which sagged beneath her. Uraza landed beside her, stirring up a cloud of ash. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

“If it was a bad idea for us, then it’s a horrible idea for them,” Meilin said, pointing to the militiamen following them up the stairs. “Do you see how they’re handling their weapons? They aren’t soldiers. They should be holding shepherds crooks, not swords.”

“My village doesn’t have any dedicated soldiers, either,” Abeke said as they took cover behind an overturned bust of a man. Abeke couldn’t be sure, but she assumed that it was a statue of Dawson and Worthy’s father. “If and when the time comes for battle, all able-bodied men are expected to fight, whether they’re teachers or hunters.”

“Even if they aren’t trained?” Meilin asked.

She nodded. “Of course, it was always frowned upon if a woman ever wanted to—” Abeke stopped as a light shone above them.

“Hey, I see you!” one of the men yelled. “Stop. You’re trespassing.”

“Save that thought,” Meilin said, taking off down the grand hallway. “Come on!”

Abeke took off after her, turning as the hallway split and intersected with other smaller hallways.

Abeke slowed as she sidestepped a cracked chandelier. Shards of glass had exploded across the entire swath of carpet. The glass fragments shone from the moonlight pouring through the collapsed ceiling. “Watch your step,” Abeke warned Uraza. “You don’t want to get glass in between your paws.”

Meilin screeched to a halt, almost causing Abeke to run into her. The entire hallway floor in front of them was cracked and splintered, with

large holes gaping through the floorboards. Below, Abeke saw what looked like a grand parlor.

“There’s no way that floor will hold us, especially running at full speed.” Meilin called forth Jhi. “But I bet we can jump it.”

Nodding, Abeke backed up a few paces. Then, just as the militiamen turned into the hallway, Meilin, Abeke, and Uraza raced and leaped across the aging wood, easily clearing it.

The men stood, their weapons hanging at their sides, as Jhi disappeared.

“You’re the Greencloaks the Oathbound are looking for!” one man yelled. He accusingly thrust his sword toward them. “Stop! Turn yourselves in!”

Meilin shook her head. “Not going to happen.”

“You don’t know the entire truth,” Abeke said. “The Oathbound are not what they seem!”

“They said you killed the Emperor of Zhong and that you tried to kill the Queen of Eura.”

“Lies!” Abeke said.

“We’re not going to change their minds, and we’re running out of time,” Meilin said. “Just shoot them and let’s get this over with.”

Abeke gasped. “Meilin!”

Meilin shrugged. “What? I didn’t say kill them. Just shoot them in the shoulder or leg or something so they’ll stop chasing us.”

“By order of the Queen of Eura, we hereby place you under arrest,” one of the other militiamen yelled, his voice quavering. He looked young, barely older than them. He held a rapier in his shaking hand.

Meilin sighed as she unsheathed her sword. “Guys, seriously. Do you not see that she has a leopard? And I have a giant panda. And you all ... you can barely hold your weapons.”

“Meilin, you’re not helping,” Abeke whispered.

“Trust me,” Meilin whispered back. Then, looking back at the men, she said, “Come on! Or are you too scared to fight two girls?”

The men held their weapons higher. “For Trunswick!” the leader roared. “Charge!”

“No!” Abeke yelled. “Wait!”

But it was too late. As soon as the men surged forward, the floor underneath them opened up. As the floorboards cracked, the men fell to the lower story.

Meilin sheathed her sword and dusted off her hands. “Well, that’s done. Let’s go.”

“We can’t just leave them,” Abeke said.

“We don’t have time—”

“They were just doing their duty,” Abeke said. She listened for a few seconds. Thanks to Uraza, she could make out three district groans. “At least they’re still alive.”

Meilin sighed. “All right, fine. Let’s help them.” They slowly walked to the edge of the large hole and peered down. The men lay in a heap on the floor. “Do you yield?” Meilin asked.

“Never,” one of the men said. Then he passed out.

Abeke and Meilin leaped to the bottom floor. Abeke drew her bow and aimed an arrow at them, although she quickly realized this was pointless. The men were in no condition to fight.

Returning her arrow to the quiver, Abeke collected the men’s weapons. “I’m sorry for the pain we caused you,” she said. “We mean you no harm.”

Meilin knelt in front of the youngest of the men as he cradled his arm. “Don’t move,” she said. He winced as she touched his wrist. “I don’t think it’s broken. Merely sprained. Hold on for a second.”

She called forth Jhi, and the man shrank away. “Don’t hurt me!” he yelled.

“We’re not going to attack you,” Meilin said. “Jhi is a healer. She’ll help.” The large panda lumbered to the man, then began licking his hand and arm. Slowly, he slumped to the ground and sighed in relief.

“These two seem fine,” Abeke said. The other man had regained consciousness. She helped both of them to their feet. “Are you hurt? Any broken bones? Jhi can help you, too.”

“Nothing hurt but my pride,” the leader said. “You’re really not going to kill us?”

“Of course not,” Abeke said. “But we *will* have to tie you up for a while,” she added sheepishly. “But don’t worry—we’ll send someone

back for you.”

The leader of the men shook his head. “But the Oathbound ... they said you were murderers. They said you would destroy us all.”

“We’re Greencloaks,” Meilin said. “We are protectors. The Oathbound are the dangerous ones.”

The leader looked at the other man, then nodded. “Their leader, Cordelia the Kind, said she’d destroy the town if she discovered you were here,” he said. “I’m sorry. We were just trying to protect ourselves.”

“We know,” Meilin said. “You three were very brave. You can tell your friends all about your adventures and embellish as much as you want ... tomorrow.” She placed her hand on her sword. “But for right now, we’re going to need to tie you up. And quickly. We have someplace to be.”



THE MIGHTY WILCO

ROLLAN'S MUSCLES INVOLUNTARILY FLEXED AS HE heard footsteps creaking above them. He wasn't sure if the others heard it—they were farther back in the basement, away from the stairs. Pausing from reading the large journal in front of him, he grabbed a torch from the wall sconce and glanced at Essix. The falcon sat at a small arch window high in the basement, looking too dignified to fly farther into the room.

Still holding the torch, Rollan moved to the base of the stairs. With his free hand, he removed his dagger from his belt. “Mind taking a look?” he asked Essix. “It’s probably Meilin and Abeke, but we’d better check just to be sure.”

The bird screeched, then took flight through the room and up the winding metal staircase. Although now empty, the Howling House was still a scary place to be. Every time the wind blew outside, the windows rattled, making Rollan flinch. The four walls surrounding them were covered with scratches and splatters of red. Rollan didn't care to speculate on the source of the stains.

Rollan watched Essix as she soared back into the basement. She perched on the wooden chandelier in the middle of the space and began pecking at something—probably an insect snack.

“She flew down here,” Rollan heard Meilin say. A few moments later, she and Abeke descended the stairs into the basement.

“What happened to you all?” Rollan asked, holding the torch so he could get a better view of them. “How did you get covered with all that ash?”

Meilin brushed the soot from her shoulder. “We ran into a little trouble, but we were able to handle it. Any luck with finding anything on the Wildcat’s Claw?”

“Not yet, but we haven’t been searching long.” He pointed them toward an untouched stack of books covered in dust and cobwebs. “You can start with those. The others are farther back, looking through, like, a thousand scrolls.”

Meilin cautiously approached the books. “Are you sure there aren’t any spiders in there?”

Rollan smiled. “If you see one, just pretend it’s a big, hairy mouse.”

She huffed in reply, but picked up one of the scrolls. Abeke took a large book beside it.

Rollan removed his cloak and returned to his book. It was cold outside, but all the torches were making the basement stuffy. The brown cloak was heavy and rough, nothing like his green cloak. He hadn’t wanted to part with it, but after Abeke’s speech last night about secrets, Rollan knew he couldn’t continue traveling with the cloak and hiding it from his friends. He and Worthy had decided to store it in Dawson’s cottage for now, underneath one of the loose floorboards. Hopefully, once they’d found all the gifts and rescued the Greencloaks, Rollan could return for it.

He wondered if Tarik would have done the same thing, had he still been with them.

Rollan finished paging through the book, then picked up an equally large and equally boring journal. He had to keep shaking his head in order to stay awake.

But then his eyes flashed open.

“I think I found something!” Rollan said. He’d discovered a full-page illustration of a large, bearded warrior and a black wildcat. The warrior’s arms were thick as tree trunks. The fur of a wild stag covered his shoulders, torso, and legs, and his metal helmet was adorned with two

sharp, ivory tusks. In his hands, he carried a large sword, poised and ready to strike.

As intimidating as the warrior was, the wildcat was even more ferocious. It stood in a crouch, claws bared and mouth curled into a snarl, waiting to pounce. Somehow, the ink in the drawing made it seem as though the wildcat's muscles rippled underneath its fur, right there on the page. Its yellow eyes peered at Rollan, as if it were trying to stare him down.

Rollan finally peeled his eyes away from the drawing, as the others surrounded him. "That's it!" Worthy said. "That's the picture I remember seeing."

Worthy took the journal from him. Rollan didn't try to stop him. "The warrior is named Gransfen the Giant," Worthy said. "The wildcat's name is Wilco."

"Like the enchanted forest?" Conor asked. "Wilcoskov?"

Worthy nodded. "Yes, I believe so." He flipped the page and continued reading, his finger tracing along each word. "This looks like a brief retelling of the history of Gransfen and Wilco. They lived a long time ago, back before there were even Greencloaks." Worthy looked up from the journal. "Hey, maybe the Trunswicks are somehow related to him. I think I had a cousin named Grant ... maybe he was named after him. I should ask Dawson about—"

"Let me see that," Conor said, taking the book from Worthy. "You can come back later to research your family history—after we find the Wildcat's Claw."

Conor began reading the book—slowly. He'd hardly been able to read when Rollan had first met him, but he had worked hard at it—even studying during their travels—and had improved greatly.

"According to this, Gransfen was from the far north. Somewhere close to the shores of Arctica." Conor kept reading. "A band of warriors called the Crimson Raiders attacked his village, taking most of the food the villagers had harvested for the long winter. The leader of the Crimson Raiders demanded that the village swear loyalty to them and hand over their firstborn sons to their order—if not, they would destroy everything. Gransfen, the first and only son of the local blacksmith, was weak,

scrawny, and sickly. In order to prove they were serious, the Crimson Raiders pulled Gransfen from his home, stripped him of all his furs, and cast him into the wilderness to starve and freeze to death. He returned three weeks later, alive and well, riding on the back of the largest wildcat anyone had ever seen. The wildcat roared so loudly that the village gates disintegrated, like a charred log turning to ash. Then the wildcat fought the raiders, snapping their swords in her jaws like they were twigs in a steel trap.”

“That’s amazing,” Rollan said. He had to admit, Wilco sounded pretty awesome—maybe even more powerful than the gila monster.

Conor turned the page. “After freeing the village, Gransfen and Wilco spent the rest of their lives fighting against the Crimson Raiders and any other threats to ancient Eura. The book compares the black wildcat to other legendary animals from across Erdas, especially in Amaya, Nilo, and Zhong. Their strength only paled in comparison to the Great Beasts themselves. Like Wilco, some of these spirit animals and their human partners had powerful items that they used to defend their homes. The book names four: the Wildcat’s Claw, the Heart of the Land, Stormspeaker, and the Dragon’s Eye. All four were gifted to the Greencloaks after the fall of the Devourer.”

“Those are the other two gifts!” Abeke said. “Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye.”

“Jump ahead,” Anka said. “Does it say what happened to them?”

Conor flipped to the end of the entry and began reading again. “No, but it does say that after years of glorious battle, Gransfen and Wilco were buried at the base of a waterfall in the very forest where Gransfen first summoned the wildcat.” Conor perked up, his eyes gleaming. “*Even the famous Greencloaks revered the pair,*” he read haltingly. “*Shortly after the war, a traveling Greencloak visited the tomb to honor the wildcat and the hero.*” Conor flipped to the next page, but it was blank. “That’s it,” he said.

“I’m guessing that Greencloak was doing more than just paying respects,” Rollan said. “They must have been hiding the sword.”

“But why?” Meilin asked. “This has been bothering me for a while now. If these gifts are so powerful, why didn’t the Greencloaks keep

them and use them to defend Erdas? The Heart of the Land has saved us twice now. We could have used that power against the Conquerors, but Olvan held back.”

Rollan frowned. “It is a little strange. Especially since they’re supposed to be these big symbols of togetherness. Why spread them all out and keep them hidden?”

Anka’s color shifted slightly. Rollan caught a glimpse of a thoughtful expression before she disappeared again. “The Greencloaks have always been tight-lipped about forbidden knowledge,” she said. “Perhaps there’s more to the gifts than it seems, and they wanted to keep those secrets from getting out.”

“Until now,” Conor said. “Whatever his reasons, Olvan needs us to retrieve the gifts.”

“Great,” Worthy moaned. “Are we really going to Wilcoskov?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Abeke asked. “Is it dangerous?”

“Worse,” Worthy said. “It’s enchanted. Full of old magic. No one enters that place anymore, not even hunters.”

Meilin shrugged. “Gransfen did.”

“Gransfen was the most noble warrior that Eura has ever known,” Worthy said. “No offense, but even you aren’t in his league, Meilin. None of us are.”

“The book says that a Greencloak entered the forest,” Abeke offered.

“But it doesn’t say that he left, does it?” Worthy said.

Rollan arched his eyebrow. “Worthy, are you really that scared?”

Behind his mask, Worthy’s eyes were solemn as he looked at Rollan. “I am. And if you knew any better, you’d be scared, too.”

Conor closed the book. “I’m scared, too. I grew up hearing all the horror stories about Wilcoskov. But if the Wildcat’s Claw is there, then that’s where we have to go.” He looked at Worthy. “Are you with us?”

Worthy scowled, but eventually nodded. “Fine, I’m in. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”



Rollan decided to tag along with Meilin and Abeke on the way back to Dawson’s cottage. After being cooped up in the basement, he wanted to

run along the rooftops, feeling the breeze in his hair. On the way, they filled him in on the trouble they'd run into at Trunswick Castle.

"We'll have Dawson go back to release them as soon as we leave," Meilin said once they neared the cottage. Rollan noticed a few candles burning by the window. He hoped that Dawson hadn't stayed up waiting for them. Running a town like Trunswick couldn't be easy. The kid needed all the rest he could get.

"People will eventually figure out that Dawson was the one helping us," Abeke said. "I hope he doesn't get into too much trouble."

"He's a smart kid," Rollan said, his hand on the door. "I'm sure he'll find a way to talk himself out of it."

He opened it, and froze.

"Or maybe not," Rollan mumbled.

Three members of the militia stood in front of him, their crossbows aimed right at his chest. Another woman stood a few feet away, a saber in her hand.

"Don't even think about calling your spirit animals," the woman said. "Just come in, nice and quiet."

Rollan, Meilin, and Abeke slowly entered the room.

"Close the door," the woman said.

Rollan shook his head. "It gets really warm in here, with so many people," he said. "But I'd be happy to close the door once you all leave." He didn't know how far away Anka and the others were, but he hoped that with the door open, they would see the trouble that they were in before walking into the same trap.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't warn you," Dawson said. "The captain got here a few minutes ago."

"The young earl almost had us fooled," the woman said. "But then my men found the strangest item in his bedroom, hidden underneath the floorboards." She held the tattered green cloak up high, then let it unravel to the ground.

Rollan didn't miss a beat. "Dawson, you're a Greencloak! You should have told us—"

"Save it," the woman snapped. She walked over to the three men holding crossbows. They looked pretty banged up, with ripped clothes

and ash in their hair. One could barely hold his weapon—the wrist of his non-firing hand was wrapped in a thick bandage. “Are these the kids you saw running through the streets?”

“Yes, Captain,” the oldest one said. “The two girls. The boy wasn’t with them.”

Rollan realized these must have been the men who chased Meilin and Abeke. Either they had escaped their bonds, or someone had found them and released them.

Meilin shook her head. “I told you that you should have shot them,” she whispered to Abeke.

“Why are you here?” the captain asked. “We’ve had enough of your kind in our town. Conquerors, Greencloaks, Oathbound, and everyone else. We just want to live our lives in peace.” The woman almost sounded like she was pleading. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

“Just put the weapons down, and we’ll be gone before morning,” Abeke said. She glanced at the three men with the crossbows.

The captain shook her head. “The Oathbound will be back by then with more men. I don’t know how, but they could tell you were here. Their leader, Cordelia the Kind, threatened to ransack only *half* the town if we turned you over upon their return.”

“She calls *that* kind?” Rollan shook his head. “And I thought Wikam the Just was misnamed.”

“Please consider what you’re proposing,” Dawson said to the woman. “You’d be a fool to trust the Oathbound over the Greencloaks. Surely you’ve heard the rumors about these bounty hunters dressed in black. They don’t care who or what they destroy. They don’t care about anything in their path. They only care about catching their target, no matter what stands in their way.”

“Yes, I’m a fool,” the captain said, turning her gaze to Dawson. “I’m a fool for thinking you were better than your father. You’re a liar, just like him. Do you plan to steal from us, too?”

“I am *not* my father,” Dawson said, his jaw taut. Beside him, Rumfuss snorted and tapped on the floor with his hooved feet. “Shylene, I asked you to organize the militia because you are brave and fair. You were one of the only people to speak out against my father. You always know the

difference between right and wrong.” He took a step toward her. “Trust your instincts,” he said. “You know I’m telling the truth.”

“Look at your men,” Rollan added. “Can’t you tell from their faces? They know we don’t mean them any harm.”

The captain glanced at her men. Their expressions were much more conflicted than hers. “It’s true, Captain,” the bearded one finally said. “They could have killed us, but didn’t. And they fixed up Sully’s arm and everything.”

The captain shook her head. “How can you trust them?” she asked. “How can you trust *any* of them? These outsiders care nothing for your lives or your families.”

“Then don’t trust them,” a voice said. “Trust me.”

Rollan turned. Slowly, Worthy faded into view, like a fog taking human shape. The men gasped.

“What type of trickery is this?” the oldest man asked, his arms shaking as he pointed his crossbow at Worthy. “Stay back, monster!”

Worthy flinched. Rollan wasn’t sure if the man had called him a monster because of the way Worthy had materialized in front of them, or because of how the Redcloak looked. Either way, it wasn’t a compliment.

“I’m not a monster,” Worthy said. “I’m one of you. At least, I used to be.” He took a cautious step inside the cottage.

“Stay where you are,” the captain warned, swinging her weapon toward him. Unlike her men, she didn’t seem the least bit intimidated. “Who are you?”

“I’m called Worthy,” he said. He reached behind his head and unfastened his mask. “But before, I was known by another name.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed as she took in Worthy’s unmasked face. She blinked a few times. “Devin Trunswick?” she asked, her voice softer. “Is that you? What happened?”

“That isn’t important.” He took another step forward. “So you do remember me. Do you also remember the last time we saw each other?”

She nodded, still taking Worthy in. “At the center of the square,” she said. “I’d been locked in the stocks for three days with barely any water. I didn’t know how much longer I could last. But you ... you stirred the

crowd and started a riot. The townsfolk overtook the guards, then freed me. We marched to the castle after that and burned it down. I would be dead if not for you. The earl would probably still be in power as well.” She pointed her sword at Rollan and the others. “You’re working with these Greencloaks?”

“I am,” Worthy said. “I trust them with my life.”

The woman took a deep breath. “Then I trust them as well,” she said. “Lower your weapons,” she said to her men. “These Greencloaks mean us no harm.” She sheathed her sword then turned to Dawson. “I’m sorry about what I said.”

He was already waving her off. “Don’t worry about it. You were only doing your duty. No one is above question in Trunswick, including me.”

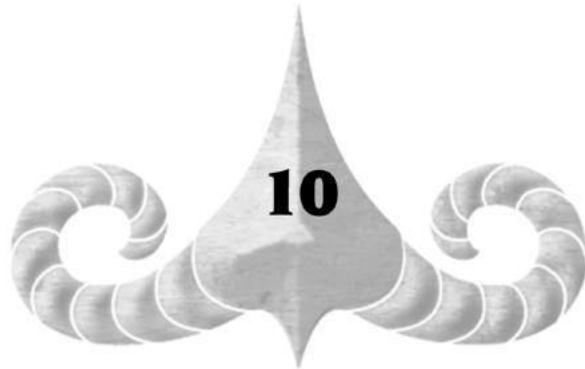
“I should apologize as well,” Rollan said to Abeke and Meilin. “I’m sorry for bringing the cloak with me. I just couldn’t part with it yet.”

Meilin patted his shoulder. “I know,” she said. “But no more secrets, okay?”

Rollan nodded. “No more. Complete honesty from now on.”

Meilin raised an eyebrow. “About everything?”

Rollan could feel the heat rising to his neck. “Well, almost everything. I do have a reputation to protect and all.” He looked at Worthy. “And speaking of truths—who would have guessed that Worthy was actually telling the truth about saving that woman? Maybe he’s not so bad after all.”



THE ENCHANTED FOREST

MEILIN'S HORSE NEIGHED AND STOMPED AT THE STIFF ground. She rubbed on its neck, trying to calm it. The animal didn't like carrying her, that was for certain. He was a field animal, more suited for pulling a plow than racing into battle, but riding was better than walking.

Meilin readjusted the sword at her side so it wouldn't interfere with her new, royal blue uniform. In addition to providing horses, Shylene, the captain of the militia, had issued each of them a Trunswick militia tunic. The journey to Wilcoskov would have taken weeks if they'd been forced to travel by foot under the cover of night. But by pretending to be part of the militia, they hoped to be able to travel during the day without attracting too much attention.

Meilin squeezed her knees around the horse, motioning him forward. She trotted over to the three militiamen—the same men who had chased her and Abeke the night before. Even with the tumble they'd taken through the floor, they seemed to be in good shape, thanks to Jhi's healing powers.

“Thank you for the horse and the clothes,” she said. “But you don't have to travel with us. It could be dangerous.”

“Captain’s orders,” the bearded one said. Meilin had learned that his name was Albert and that he was a pig farmer. “The villagers to the north know our faces. You’ll be questioned less if you’re seen traveling with us.”

“Thank you,” Meilin said again. It seemed too much of a risk—these simple townsfolk risking their lives to help them. But Meilin reminded herself that the people of Trunswick had much to lose as well if the Greencloaks weren’t successful.

The others slowly climbed onto their horses. Anka looked the strangest of them all, wearing her blue tunic, plainly in sight. She still carried Meilin’s old quarterstaff.

Rollan was the last to mount his horse. He almost fell off a few times, but he eventually made it onto the saddle. “Are you guys sure that you don’t want to walk? It’s probably safer.”

Meilin rolled her eyes. Even after all this time, Rollan still wasn’t comfortable on horseback.

They passed the city walls just as the sun peeked over the horizon. Now that it was easier to see, Meilin noticed that the flags flying above the city walls displayed the image of Rumfuss the Boar. The last time she’d visited, the flags glorified Elda, the black wildcat with whom Worthy had been unnaturally bonded.

Meilin slowed down and joined Worthy at the rear of the group. “Did you enjoy being home?”

“It’s always good to see my brother,” Worthy said. “But this isn’t really home anymore.” He nodded toward the men at the front of the group. They were talking with Conor, laughing about some shared story between them. “Did you see how they looked at me? Did you hear what they said? They’ve made a point of steering clear of me.”

“It’s just because they aren’t used to the way you look,” Meilin said. “Give it time.”

He gave a weak laugh. “That would be fine, if it were only that. But my face and claws aren’t the only reasons why they keep avoiding me. Dawson was right—the old Devin Trunswick was a real bully. Take Sully, for instance,” he said, nodding toward the youngest of the militiamen. “His sister was jailed in the Howling House for a week, all

because my father and I didn't like the way she looked at us when we passed by one day. And Albert and his hog farm? I used to take my dogs hunting on his land once a fortnight, and wouldn't even pay Albert when my hounds slaughtered one of his pigs."

"Have you tried apologizing?" Meilin asked.

He seemed hopeful. "Do you think that would really work?"

Meilin shrugged. "I don't know. But it doesn't hurt to try."

They continued riding all day, not stopping until it was almost dark. While Conor, Rollan, and Abeke prepared their meal, Meilin took Anka and the other militiamen to a clearing to work on some fighting techniques.

"The key to good fighting is good footwork," Meilin said, standing before them. Four arm-length strips of cloth were draped over her shoulder. "If you stand with your feet too close together, you run the risk of losing your balance and falling in a fight. If your feet are too apart, you won't be able to move fast enough to counter your opponent's attacks." She tossed each of them one of the strips. "Tie these between your ankles, and let's get started."

She spent the next hour working on their footwork, having each of them attack and parry. Then she had them pair up and face off against each other. Meilin was worried that Anka would struggle against the older Albert, but she held her own, even causing Albert to trip and fall a few times.

Once dinner was ready, the three men untied their cloths from their ankles and rushed to the campfire. Anka stayed behind.

"You're not hungry?" Meilin asked, picking up the discarded strips from the ground.

"I'll eat in a little bit," Anka said, twirling her quarterstaff like Meilin had taught her. "I want to practice a little more first."

Meilin pulled out her sword. "I'm ready whenever you are."

As Anka and Meilin began to circle each other, Toey, Anka's chameleon, scampered down her leg and hid in her boot. "You're getting pretty good with that quarterstaff," Meilin said, before lunging.

Anka blocked her blade, then swung the other end of the staff at Meilin. Meilin ducked and then rolled out of the way. "Very good,"

Meilin continued, getting to her feet.

“Thanks. I’ve been studying how you move,” Anka said. Now she became the aggressor, swinging and lunging at Meilin. Meilin blocked each strike, then leaped onto a tree branch, out of reach of Anka’s staff.

“Let’s try again,” Meilin said, peering down at Anka from the safety of her tree. “But this time, use your spirit animal.”

Anka leaned against the quarterstaff and wiped her brow. “Are you sure? That doesn’t seem fair.”

“In a real battle for life and death, you shouldn’t worry about what is and isn’t fair,” Meilin replied, swinging out of the tree. “We’re partnered with our spirit animals for a reason. Use Toey’s strengths to help you.”

Anka nodded, then began to fade from view. Meilin spun in a circle, waiting for Anka to strike. Finally, Meilin heard the familiar swoosh of the quarterstaff swinging through the air, and stepped to the side just as it hit the ground. She stomped down, pinning the staff between her boot and the dirt, then performed a spinning roundhouse kick, knocking it loose from Anka’s grip. Slowly, it came into view.

Meilin grinned. “Come on, Anka. You can show yourself. The fight is over.”

“Not yet,” Anka said. “Would you stop fighting just because you didn’t have a weapon?”

Meilin faced the direction that she thought the voice was coming from. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she said. “Seriously, you should—”

With an *oomph*, Meilin found herself on the ground, the wind momentarily knocked out of her chest. She flipped back into a fighting stance and scanned the area. She still couldn’t see Anka. Smirking, she began to run in a circle, dragging her boot heels into the dry ground. She was creating a small dust storm.

Finally, she saw something waver before her. Then Anka coughed. “There you are,” Meilin said, running after her.

Anka took off toward the same tree that Meilin had leaped into moments before. She reached the trunk, then quickly scampered up the bark before disappearing into the leaves. Meilin stopped and placed her hands on her hips. She’d never seen Anka move that quickly before. She wondered if her sudden increase in speed was thanks to her spirit animal.

“Let’s call this one a draw,” Meilin said, still searching the tree. “I’m tired, and our dinner is getting cold. The only thing worse than hot grub stew is cold grub stew.”

“Deal,” a voice said behind her.

Meilin spun around to find Anka standing there with the quarterstaff in her hand. Its end hovered underneath Meilin’s chin, ready to strike. A sly smile sat on the now visible Anka’s face.

“Remind me not to spar with you again without Jhi’s help,” Meilin said, pushing the staff away from her. “How did you get out of the tree and around me without me seeing or hearing you?”

Anka shrugged. “You’ve been good at fighting your whole life. I’ve been good at hiding.” They began walking toward the campsite. “I can teach you if you’d like. Show you how to move better without being seen.”

Meilin shook Anka’s hand. “It’s a deal.”

Anka smiled at her once more. “I’m glad fate brought us together, Meilin. You’re almost like the sister I never had.”

Meilin grinned as well. *Sister*. That had a nice ring to it.



Meilin continued to train Anka and the militia whenever they camped for the night. Worthy even helped out with their training a couple times. The men were still wary of him, but they didn’t keep their distance like they had at the beginning of the trip. Meilin hoped that they were making progress toward becoming friends. Or if not friends, she at least hoped that the men could understand that the past was the past, and that Worthy was now a different person.

The days had grown colder the farther north they traveled. The winds strengthened as well, bringing freezing rain, then sleet and snow. She was glad that they’d come equipped with wool packs. That would help keep their clothes and food dry.

The weather was indeed brutal, almost as bad as when they’d trekked through Arctica in search of Suka the Polar Bear. If they were lucky, the conditions would also slow the Oathbound. Using Essix’s powers, Rollan had caught sight of them two days prior. They, too, were headed north.

The group paused at the edge of a large river. Fog hugged the ground, covering the frozen soil and rocky banks. Across from them stood the enchanted forest, Wilcoskov.

“Why do they call it enchanted?” Abeke asked, sliding off her horse.

“I’m not really sure,” Worthy said. “There used to be rumors that an ancient order lived in the forest. They practiced dark magic, using the bones of children in their potions.” He shrugged. “At least, that’s what my tutors used to tell me when I misbehaved.”

“According to my brothers, the forest is filled with the ghosts of the Crimson Raiders,” Conor added. “As punishment for their crimes against Eura, the royal family banished the warriors to the forest. They supposedly froze to death within hours, but their tortured spirits remained tied to the forest for all eternity.”

“Knowing the Greencloaks, they could have started the rumor about the forest being enchanted,” Meilin said. “They probably assumed it would be a good way for people to stay out and away from Gransfen’s grave.”

“There’s only one way to find out for sure,” Abeke said, leading her horse to the militiamen. “This is as far as you all go,” Abeke said to Albert. “And you can take these horses with you. It’ll be easier for us to travel without them.”

“That’s the first good news I’ve heard all week,” Rollan said, sliding off his own mount. He landed on the ground with a thud and the horse nickered. It sounded as if it was laughing at him.

Worthy slipped off his tunic and handed it to Albert. “Do me a favor,” he said. “Keep an eye out for my brother, will you? He can be a little hardheaded.”

“Sure thing.” Albert took the tunic. “Good luck, my lor—uh, Devin—I mean, Worthy.” He extended his hand to Worthy, and the boy eagerly took it for a handshake. “And stop by my home the next time you’re in town. My kids would love to hear more about your adventures.”

Worthy smiled at the man. As Meilin watched him, she realized that, for the first time on their journey, he wasn’t wearing his mask.

After the militiamen rode off, Conor began cutting some fallen logs in order to make a raft. With all of them working together, it only took a

few minutes to collect the logs and lace them together.

Using a thick branch, Conor navigated them across the water. “This’ll probably be frozen solid in a few weeks,” Conor said, pushing the branch into the river bottom. “Good thing we didn’t try to swim across. We’d probably freeze to death.”

Once on the other side, they quickly scampered up the bank. “This isn’t a forest,” Rollan said. “It’s more like a graveyard. A place where trees go to die.”

Meilin didn’t want to agree with Rollan, but he was right. Wilcoskov was very creepy. The fog covering the ground was so thick it looked like they were stepping through rain clouds. Ahead of them, the naked trees stretched to the sky, with snow capping each of the bare branches. The wind blew through the skeletal trees, making a howling, almost unnatural sound.

Before entering the forest, they called forth their spirit animals, including Jhi. Meilin knew they’d need as much help as possible to get through the tangled maze. Essix flew ahead in search of the waterfall, while the others followed Briggan, Uraza, and Jhi.

They traveled for what seemed like hours. Meilin was sure that they were just walking in circles—each tree looked the same—though the animals never appeared to be confused. Dead, stiff moss covered all the trees, creating silver curtains cascading from the sky. Gnarled roots and thick, twisted branches blocked them from all sides, making the journey that much slower. They couldn’t make it ten paces without someone tripping on something, or being sideswiped by thorns or huge burrs. Somehow, the wind seemed to blow from all sides all at the same time, never giving them a break from the frigid chill.

Finally, Essix returned, landing on a tree in front of the other animals. After squawking a few times, she took flight again. The other animals continued moving forward.

“I think that means we’re going in the right direction,” Rollan said, his teeth chattering.

They kept moving, walking through lunchtime. The wet, cold air had somehow made it through Meilin’s leather boots and wool socks, the chill digging deeper with every step. She walked beside Jhi, in the hopes

that the animal would keep her warm. Rollan had mocked her at first ... before finally huddling against the giant panda as well.

Sometime later, Meilin jolted to a stop as a foul stench hit her nose.

“That is dis-gust-ing,” Rollan said, covering his mouth. “And I thought this place couldn’t get any worse.”

“Over here,” Conor said. Using his ax blade, he juttied toward an animal carcass. “I think this is what’s causing the smell.” He turned it over, and a new wave of foulness hit them. “Yep, this is it.”

“What type of animal is that?” Meilin asked, stepping closer. The huge creature had been ripped open, with half its flank already devoured. She could still see the claw and teeth marks in its skin. As she circled it, trying to get a better look, she noticed another gaping hole in the animal. It looked as if it had been ripped apart. Two broken tusks protruded from its snout. What remained of its gray, coarse fur was matted with dried blood.

“There are two more carcasses over here,” Worthy said. “They smell like Rollan’s feet.”

“Ha-ha,” Rollan said dryly.

“Is it native to Eura?” Anka asked Conor.

He shrugged. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“Me neither,” Worthy said. “It looks like some type of huge hog. Or perhaps a boar.”

“I think we should leave,” Abeke said. She had drawn her bow and nocked an arrow, and was cautiously spinning around in place. Uraza stood beside her, crouched low to the ground, almost hidden by the fog. “Those carcasses were killed recently.”

Meilin took a step backward, and stumbled. Waving the fog away, she saw a line of deep, massive paw tracks.

“We’re in some animal’s lair,” Abeke continued. “We need to leave before it returns.”

Then Briggan growled. “Too late,” Conor said, his gloved hands tightly gripping the handle of his ax. “Briggan senses something. I do, too.”

Then they heard a branch snap. And then another after that.

“This way,” Anka said, moving toward a group of trees. “I’ll hide us.”

As quietly as they could, they made their way to Anka. After a second, they turned silver and brown, blending into the dying trees and moss behind them.

All the while, the sounds of crunching leaves and tree limbs grew closer. Something howled. Something close.

“Don’t even breathe,” Abeke whispered.

Slowly, five brown bears appeared out of the fog. As they growled at one another, Meilin could feel Rollan flinch beside her. The bears were gigantic—at least as large as Jhi—with thick coarse fur covering their hulking bodies.

The bears lumbered farther into their lair. The largest of them sniffed at one of the carcasses, then let out a wailing roar. Frothy drool dripped from its jaw and onto the ground. On the other side of her, Meilin could hear Worthy’s ragged breaths, and she knew it wasn’t from the cold.

A second, smaller bear approached the largest one, sniffing the air. The animals turned toward Meilin and the others. They growled, spewing more drool across the frozen ground.

“I think they can see us,” Worthy whispered.

The three other bears joined the first two. They all began to paw at the ground, letting off a succession of grunts.

“Maybe they’re just pawing at the ground to stay warm,” Rollan offered.

Then, letting off a deafening roar, the bears charged toward the trees. *Their* trees.

“Run!” Abeke screamed.

They took off, thrashing through the woods. The bears followed close behind. The entire forest seemed to shake thanks to the bears thundering paws. At first, Meilin had been worried that Jhi would be too slow, but the great panda was easily outpacing her, only pausing to make sure *she* was keeping up.

“We can’t run like this forever,” Rollan said. “Let’s take to the trees.”

“The branches are too low,” Conor said. “They might be able to climb after us.”

“No, over there!” Worthy said, pointing to a large tall evergreen to their right. Its lower branches had already been stripped by something,

leaving nothing but exposed, clawed bark until halfway up the tree.

“Aren’t you worried about what made those marks on that tree?” Rollan asked.

“I’ll worry about that later,” Worthy replied as he extracted his claws and began climbing the tree. Anka quickly climbed up behind him.

“Jhi, can you help the rest of them up?” Meilin asked. She glanced behind her. The bears were still charging, their wails ringing through the forest. “Abeke first. Then she can give us cover.”

Jhi lumbered to the base of the tree, then held out her paws. Abeke nodded, called Uraza back in passive, then took off toward the panda. She leaped into the panda’s outstretched paws. Jhi flung her high into the air, past Worthy and Anka. Abeke grabbed on to a branch and pulled herself up. As soon as she was sitting, she whipped an arrow from her quiver and began firing at the bears. The arrows found their mark but did not puncture the bears’ thick hides. However, they at least slowed down.

Meilin was the last into the tree. As soon as she grabbed a branch, she called Jhi back to her. The black-and-white mark appeared on the back of her hand just as the bears reached the base of the tree.

The animals raked their claws over the tree trunk, but were too large to climb it. Then they rammed the tree, over and over, causing snow and small branches to rain down from above. Abeke almost fell after one attack, but Conor was able to catch her and pull her back onto the branch at the last second.

“Thanks,” Abeke said. She slipped her bow back over her shoulder. “No point in wasting any more arrows.”

“So now what are we supposed to do?” Anka asked.

Meilin shrugged. “We wait. And hope that the tree outlasts the bears.”



THE WATERFALL

THE BEARS RAMMED THE TREE FOR ALMOST AN HOUR. The trunk bent and sighed with each attack, but didn't break. Eventually, the bears tired of this, and their attacks slowly dwindled. But instead of leaving, they curled up around the tree, content to wait the humans out. It seemed the bears knew Conor and the others couldn't remain in there forever.

Conor wasn't sure how long they ultimately stayed in the tree. Day had turned to night before the bears finally disappeared back into the fog. But even then, they waited a full two hours before venturing down, just to be safe.

Conor decided to go down first. Once he reached the ground, he released Briggan. The wolf stepped forward and sniffed the air. After a few seconds, he seemed satisfied that the threat had disappeared and returned to Conor's side.

"Come on down," Conor said. "I think it's safe."

"Hopefully the Oathbound will run into those bears as well," Rollan said, sliding down the tree.

"Has Essix seen them?" Conor asked.

Rollan shook his head. "That's what worries me. They're no longer on the road to the forest. So either they turned around, or they're already here and hidden from Essix's view."

“Keep your eyes open, Uraza,” Abeke said. “We need to be on the lookout for both animals and Oathbound.”

“And ghosts,” Worthy mumbled.

Following their spirit animals, they continued on in what they hoped was the direction of the waterfall. They didn’t dare light a torch—they didn’t want to draw any unwelcome attention. Using Briggan’s senses, Conor took the lead, trying to help navigate them past any unseen obstacles. Worthy only tripped twice. Conor took this as a positive.

“We should stop for the night,” Anka finally said. “It’s getting too difficult to see. Plus, I don’t want to stumble into another den of those wild bears by accident.”

They all agreed. Finding a large outcropping of boulders, the team hastily made camp. Conor offered to keep first watch. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway.

Conor had heard stories about the great Euran wildcat all his life. She was second only to Briggan in fame. Many towns and villages had flown her likeness on their official banners and flags, in the hopes that she would bring good luck—such as protection from wild animals or a good harvest. Conor couldn’t believe he was actually close to seeing the grave of the real beast. He didn’t like all the fighting and politics associated with being a Greencloak, but he loved the adventure and the thrill of discovering new things. Even with everything that had happened, he didn’t want to go back to his old life as a shepherd and servant boy.

Once morning came, the group packed up and continued through the forest. As the day wore on, the roar of falling water grew louder. The sound seemed to propel them forward, encouraging them to scamper through the forest at a quicker pace.

Finally, the forest opened up, revealing that they were standing at the top of a huge valley. They gasped at the sight. Sunlight reflected brilliantly off the water below, forcing them to shield their eyes. To their left, a large thundering waterfall cascaded down a fragmented cliff face, creating a thick, white mist where it joined with a swirling pool. The rushing waters churned within the cove; Conor could make out huge, jagged rocks and massive boulders poking through the surface. The

water seemed to thrash around the small bay before continuing downstream along a twisting path to deeper parts of the forest.

Conor cupped his hands over his eyes to get a better look at the valley. There, at the banks of the river, were blooming red and yellow flowers. He rubbed his eyes, just to be sure they were working properly, then looked again. There even appeared to be fruit trees down at the bottom of the falls, lush with green leaves. How could that be? How could anything grow in this environment, with all that snow and ice?

Then he realized that the valley *had* no snow and ice. The landscape of ice and dead trees faded away about a quarter of the way from the base of the valley, replaced with wide trees and other wildlife.

“Guys, it’s not snowing down there,” he said. “See the plants and flowers?”

They all leaned forward to take a closer look. “That’s impossible,” Abeke said. She shook a small, ice-covered branch beside her, dumping freshly fallen snow to the ground. “How can it be freezing up here, and a paradise down below?”

“Some rumors say that the black wildcat breathed fire when she was really mad,” Worthy said. “When she hissed and spat, she’d be liable start forest fires. Maybe some of that heat is still around.”

Meilin rolled her eyes. “Or more than likely, we’re close to a geyser or fault line that keeps that area warm.”

“Maybe that’s why they called it an enchanted forest,” Anka said. “It would have certainly appeared magical to people not used to sights such as this.”

“I don’t care what they called it, and I don’t care why it’s warm,” Rollan said. “I just want to get down there so I can feel my fingers and toes again.”

They slowly made their way down into the valley, traversing roots and outcroppings of boulders. As they continued down, Conor began removing layers of his warm clothes. By the time they reached the bottom, they had all shed their heavy fur coats. The rumble of the waterfall was so loud that they had to yell in order to hear one another.

“I’m betting there’s a cave somewhere behind the falls!” Meilin bellowed. “But what’s the best way to get to it?”

Abeke picked up a small piece of wood and tossed it into the water. It bobbed up and down in a frenzy as it was quickly swept downstream. “We won’t be able to swim to it. There’s no way we could fight against that current.”

Conor was relieved to hear her say that. While he could make do in the water, he wasn’t the best swimmer. Worthy seemed to be just as relieved by Abeke’s observation.

“Maybe there’s another way around,” Rollan said. “Here comes Essix now, to save the day.” Then Rollan grew still, and Conor knew he was slipping into the falcon’s mind.

Conor looked up to see Essix’s brown wings stretched wide. She slowly spiraled down into the valley, soaring over the team’s heads. Tucking her wings into herself, she dove into the waterfall. For a moment, Conor was worried that the strong, pummeling water would send her crashing into the rocks below. But then Essix emerged from the other side, not a feather out of place.

“Yeah, it looks like there’s an entrance back there,” Rollan said, shaking his head. “There’s a small ledge that leads to a cave behind the waterfall. It’s narrow, but I think we can make it.” He pointed to a rocky land ramp leading to the cliff wall. “That’s the way up.”

They followed Rollan as he shrugged off his pack. “Be careful,” he said, reaching the face of the cliff a few moments later. “The ledge is covered with moss and lichen, and slick from all the water.”

The rest of them removed their packs, only taking what was essential. Meilin hesitated after removing her pack, almost as if she was going to pull something from it, but left it on the ground with the others. Conor offered Briggan a leftover piece of jerky from that morning’s breakfast, then called the wolf into passive state. He didn’t want to take the chance of Briggan losing his footing and falling into the river. Briggan was strong, but that current would have been too much for even him to swim against.

One by one, they climbed onto the narrow ledge, their backs pressed against the rough, uneven cliff face. Conor’s toes hung over the edge. Now was not a great time to have large feet.

“I wish we had some rope to tie ourselves together with,” Meilin said. “Maybe we could use some of the vines from the forest.”

“We’ll be fine,” Rollan said, slowly edging along. “Just don’t look down.”

Of course, Conor chose right then to glance below him. His stomach twisted and churned just as much as the river beneath them.

Conor was halfway across when they heard a rumbling sound.

“What is that?” Anka asked. “More bears?”

“No, it’s much closer,” Meilin said. “It almost sounds like it’s coming from the—duck!”

Conor covered his face as a wave of bats streamed from behind the waterfall. They were small, but loud—their shrieks even blocked out the roaring water.

“Keep moving forward,” Abeke yelled, shielding her face with her arm. “We have to make it to the cave.”

Just then, another sharp scream pierced the sky. But this wasn’t an animal. It was a distinctly human voice.

“Rollan!” Meilin yelled.

Conor opened his eyes to see Rollan flailing below them, his arms outstretched as he plummeted toward the bubbling water. Rollan was heading right for one of the largest—and sharpest—of the boulders.

Maybe Rollan sensed what was ahead. Ceasing his flailing, he pulled himself into a ball. Then, when the time was right, he kicked out against the cliff and dove cleanly into the water. By pushing himself away from the wall, he was able to avoid the largest of the rocks.

“Yay!” Conor cheered. “I thought he was a goner.”

“It’s not over yet,” Anka yelled. “Look!”

To their horror, Rollan was thrashing around the water, fighting against the current, but he was losing steam.

“Hold on to something, Rollan!” Abeke yelled.

Rollan turned, trying to grab a boulder, but he slipped past it and continued down the river. He pivoted again, trying to grasp another rock, but instead smashed into it. Rollan was visibly shaken by the impact, his head rolling around on his neck.

“I’m going in,” Meilin said. She pressed her hands against the rock wall, preparing to launch herself off.

“No, you can’t,” Abeke said. “You’re not strong enough!”

Meilin was furiously shaking her head. “He’ll drown if I don’t go.”

“No, you’ll both drown,” Worthy said. “But I won’t.” And with that, Worthy let off a ferocious howl and leaped off the cliff. With his red cloak billowing behind him, he almost looked like he was flying as he dove into the water.

Worthy disappeared into the frothy haze, and for a second, no one saw him. Then he emerged, spitting water as he did.

“Hold on, Rollan!” Conor yelled. “Keep fighting! Worthy’s coming for you!”

Worthy paused for long enough to get his bearings, then sped toward Rollan, his arms and legs propelling him through the water. He caught the boy just before he was about to get pulled into the twisting current and dragged farther into the forest. Worthy handed Rollan something. It looked like a black vine. And then, very slowly, Worthy turned his body and powered through the white-capped current. Conor realized he was holding his breath as he watched his friends battle back to dry land.

Finally, Worthy and Rollan reached the bank. Conor and the others crawled off the ledge and rushed to them.

Jhi appeared with a flash by Rollan’s side before Meilin had even reached him. The panda licked him a few times, but he waved her away. “I’m fine,” he said. “Just need ... to catch ... my breath.” He pointed a shaky finger at Worthy. “Help him.”

Worthy lay sprawled out on his back, his mask slightly askew. “I. Hate. Water,” he said as the panda licked his face. “But I think I hate panda spit more.”

“Worthy, that was amazing!” Conor said, kneeling beside his friend. Worthy had a few scratches, but otherwise seemed okay. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“It was also very brave,” Meilin said, much more quietly. She placed her hand on the Redcloak’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, Worthy, thanks for giving me a hand back there,” Rollan said, still lying on his back. He paused, his lips twisting into a smile, then

added, "Or I guess I should say, thanks for giving me a tail."

Worthy finally stood up. "Not another word," he warned, straightening his mask. "Or I'll throw you back in myself." But then he placed his hands on his hips in a heroic pose. "And you're welcome."

"Do you want to change clothes?" Abeke asked, nodding toward their discarded packs. "Are you cold?"

"I'll be fine," Worthy said. "Plus, there's no way I'm taking off this cloak."

They all fell silent for a second. Conor was sure that they were all thinking about their abandoned green cloaks.

Meilin helped Rollan to sit up. "Your cloak is ripped," she said, fingering the brown fabric. "You should change into something dry."

"I'll be fine," Rollan said. "It's not even that cold down here."

"No, seriously." Meilin walked to her pack, then carried it over to Rollan. She slowly rummaged through it. "I think I have something you'd be more comfortable in."

She pulled out his green cloak.

For a moment, Rollan seemed speechless. He took the cloak from her, running his hands along it. Then he brought it to his nose, smelling it to confirm it was his. "But I thought it was too dangerous to keep this," he finally said.

"I know," Meilin replied. "But we're Greencloaks. We shouldn't be ashamed of who we are." She helped unfasten the brown cloak from around his neck, then tossed it aside. "I think we'd all feel a little better with a reminder of Tarik on this journey. We all miss him, too."



BOND TOKENS

WORTHY HAD NO IDEA WHY HE LEAPED OFF THE CLIFF to save Rollan. Worthy hated water. And now his beautiful red cloak was drenched, making it twice as heavy.

As he wrung out the fabric, he told himself that he'd jumped to save the Heart of the Land tied around Rollan's neck, but he knew he was lying to himself. As much as he didn't want to admit it, these Greencloaks were growing on him. He actually liked Rollan, bad jokes and all.

Prior to joining the Redcloaks, he'd always had trouble making friends. When he was younger, other kids had played with him only because they were forced to by their parents in order to gain favor with his father. Similarly, when he was a Conqueror, the only reason that Zerif put up with him was because of his father's importance and hefty monetary donations.

But these four—Conor, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan—they genuinely cared for one another. They liked spending time together. And now, he liked spending time with them, too. He even liked Anka, when he remembered she was there.

Once he and Rollan had rested from their dip in the water, they tried to scale the cliff again. This time, they tied themselves to one another using black vines found in the valley forest. Rollan looked as if he was

going to make another joke about Worthy's tail, but one look from him made Rollan reconsider.

Worthy took the lead this time. With his claws, he had a better chance of holding on to the cliff if someone fell and tried to drag them all down.

"How much farther?" Anka yelled as they passed behind the waterfall.

"Almost there," Worthy called back. Once behind the waterfall, the ledge widened, making it big enough for him to walk without hugging the wall. Very little sunlight was able to stream through the falls. The ledge was dark, so he waited for a moment to let his eyes adjust. Eventually, he noticed that the overhang grew even wider as it approached what looked like the cave entrance.

He froze once he was at the opening. "Whoa," he murmured.

Before Worthy stood the largest statue he'd ever seen—and being the son of the former Earl of Trunswick, he'd seen plenty. The sculpture was similar to the illustration of Gransfen and the mighty Wilco from the journal they'd read at the Howling House. Carved from what looked like pure black obsidian, Gransfen held the famed Wildcat's Claw in his hands, pointing it at an unknown enemy. Wilco, nearly as large as the man, stood on her hind legs, her claws ready to maul their unseen foe.

At first, Worthy thought the statue had been built all the way to the top of the cave. But after noting the small boulders and crushed rocks lying at the base, he looked again. The entrance had begun to cave in. It was only the statue—literally, Gransfen's broad shoulders—that kept the cave mouth open.

"Don't touch it," Anka said as the others joined them at the statue. "We don't want to accidentally cause a collapse. There's no telling how long we'd be trapped in here."

They slowly stepped past the statue. Conor released Briggan. The wolf scratched at the rocky ground then stepped farther into the cave, following Conor. The others released their animals as well, and a splash announced that Essix had soared through the waterfall. She landed on Rollan's shoulder and shook her feathers out, dousing him with water.

With her beak, she lifted up a small edge of Rollan's green cloak.

"Like it?" he asked.

The gyrfalcon squawked a reply. Rollan nodded. “Yeah, me too,” he said, following the others into the cave.

As the cavern narrowed, Conor pulled a torch from his waistband, and he and Briggan took the lead at the front. Worthy covered the rear, turning around every few minutes to make sure that they weren’t being followed. Now that his eyes were fully adjusted to the dark, he didn’t need as much light to see. But with the falls still roaring in their ears, he was afraid he wouldn’t hear someone sneaking up on them until it was too late.

The cave was a series of long, narrow tunnels, each connected end on end, and each growing smaller as they moved farther into the cliffside. Briggan and Uraza growled as their feet slipped on loose pebbles. Glancing above, Worthy noticed more bats. Thankfully, this bunch didn’t seem interested in waking up and attacking them.

“Yuck,” Conor said from up ahead. “I walked right into a spiderweb.” Then a second later, he added, “Sorry Meilin. I meant to say a mouse web.”

“Thanks,” she replied, with a little tremble in her voice. She placed her hand on Jhi, who barely fit through the narrowing spaces. Jhi rubbed her muzzle against Meilin, then gave her a friendly lick on the arm. Worthy couldn’t help but smile. Meilin was the finest warrior he’d ever met. How could someone so ferocious be afraid of spiders?

The long, dark cave dead-ended into a huge expanse. But it wasn’t a natural cavern—it looked like it had been hand-carved. Worthy ran his hands along the smooth wall. Something caught his attention. Someone—or *something*—had etched small intersecting ridges into the wall.

“Ouch!” Rollan yelled, falling over as Essix took flight from his arm. “There’s something in the middle of the room. It looks like a big, rectangular rock. Conor, can you bring the torch over here so I can get a better look?”

“Wait, try to light this first,” Abeke said, pulling a dusty, half-burned torch off the wall. “I think it will still catch.”

“There’s another torch over there,” Meilin called out.

Conor quickly lit the torches with a flint and some oil, illuminating the room.

Worthy stepped back to get a better view of the wall. It wasn't just random ridges. It was a drawing. No, a language. It looked like etchings of runes—ancient letters used by long-gone Euran civilizations.

“Can you read it?” Meilin asked him.

He shook his head. “I don't think so.” Worthy had been forced to learn a lot of languages, but he didn't remember any of his tutors showing him writing like this. The more he stared at it, however, the more he realized that some of the symbols were familiar.

“Guys, come take a look at this,” Rollan said.

Worthy and Meilin joined the others. Two matching, equally large slabs of rock sat in the middle of the room. They looked to be made of solid stone, but they didn't match the rocky makeup of the cavern walls.

“I think it's the same type of stone the statue was chiseled from,” Worthy said, kneeling to get a closer look. He placed his hands on the tablet, then pulled it back. The room was warm, but the slabs were as cold as the forest above them. “They're freezing,” he said. “How is that possible?”

“And how did they even get them through the cave?” Rollan asked. “Those things are massive. They're way too large to fit through all those winding tunnels and way too heavy to carry.”

Meilin took her torch and circled the slate. “I think there are hinges on this side,” she said.

“I see some, too,” Anka said from the other side. “It kind of looks like a door.”

“But how do you open it?” Rollan asked. “There aren't any handles.”

“Look around,” Abeke said, “There must be a switch or lever somewhere that will trigger it open.”

While the others started inspecting the cavern walls, pressing into the rock in the hope that they'd find a secret button, Worthy returned to the runes.

“I think this might be a message,” he said. “But it's old. I'm going to try to decipher it.”

The others searched the entire room while Worthy sat cross-legged in front of the wall. Using his claws, he wrote out possible translations into the rocky ground, but nothing seemed to make sense.

“Making any progress?” Anka asked, appearing beside him. Worthy jumped and let out a small scream.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to sneak up on you.” She pointed to the wall. “Any luck?”

He shrugged, then looked back at the words he’d drawn on the ground. “The closest I’ve come is: *Each day must end, but the mighty shall rise again under a volcano’s roar.*”

“That makes no sense,” Rollan said, pausing beside them.

Worthy snorted. “You want to give it a try?”

Abeke aimed an arrow toward a natural hollow in the ceiling. She released it, hitting the hole spot-on, but nothing happened. “Essix, do you mind retrieving my arrow?” she asked the falcon. She returned her bow to her shoulder. “Keep working on the translation, Worthy,” she said. “I have faith in you. It could be the instructions on how to open the doors.”

“Or it could be a warning that we should leave them shut.” But even as he said it, Worthy was sitting back down to study the markings.

The rest of the Greencloaks searched the entire room again. Rollan even tried jumping on the doors, but all he accomplished was slipping and hurting his other foot.

He sighed as Jhi slowly licked his ankle. “This is pointless,” he said. “Maybe there’s another cave we missed. Or a switch outside of the room.”

“Worthy, can you repeat the message?” Abeke asked, shooting another arrow at the ceiling. “Maybe we’ll have better luck if we work together.”

Worthy sighed, then repeated the message: “*Each day must end, but the mighty shall rise again under a volcano’s roar.*”

Abeke walked over to read Worthy’s translation. “The first part reminds me of an old saying from my village. When someone dies, the elders sometimes say that the deceased’s ‘sun has set.’ Their day has ended. It’s a poetic way of talking about death.” She glanced at the door. “I think the message is saying that Gransfen and Wilco are behind those doors. They’re waiting to rise again.”

Meilin snapped up, suddenly alert. “And on the boat, on the way from Amaya, Worthy said the wildcat’s roar was as loud as an erupting volcano.”

“One thousand erupting volcanoes,” Worthy corrected.

“Yes, yes,” she said. “My point is, you learned that as a kid, right? That can’t be a coincidence. It must mean something important.”

“I was thinking the same,” Rollan said. “When volcanoes blow up, they’re like earthquakes, right?” He slipped his hand inside his shirt and pulled out the Heart of the Land. “Maybe I can try using the gila monster’s earthquake power.”

“Are you daft?” Worthy asked. “You’d cause a cave-in. Did you bash your head in when you fell into the water?”

“I said *maybe*,” Rollan stressed, returning the amulet to the safety of his shirt. “I’m just throwing out options. We have to do something.”

“Volcanoes also spew lava when they erupt,” Meilin said. “Fire. Heat.” She held up the torch in her hands, inspecting its flame. “Maybe we should heat up the doors. You said those slabs were cold, right? Maybe warmth will trigger the doors to open.”

“So ... if we set the doors on fire, they’ll open up, and Gransfen and Wilco will rise again?” Conor asked.

“Just to be clear, I’m not exactly sure that my translation is correct,” Worthy said. “For all we know, an actual volcano could be waiting for us on the other side.”

Meilin stepped forward. Her torch illuminated her face as she walked to the center of the room. Her hair was damp from sweat, and her skin was covered in grime from the cavern walls. “Only one way to find out.”

Meilin tossed the torch onto the slabs. It bounced twice before coming to a stop. Conor and Abeke followed her lead, pitching their torches on the black slates as well.

At first nothing happened.

Then thick gray smoke began to seep out through the seams between the doors.

“It’s the volcano!” Worthy yelled.

“Enough about the volcano,” Meilin said. “Look, something’s happening.”

The doors in the floor had begun to change color, quickly shifting from their dark ink-black color to a fiery orange-red hue. There was a large hiss and then a pop. The doors slowly began to creak open.

More smoke spilled out as the doors opened up. Worthy could see what looked like long stone columns rising up from below, pushing the doors open from the inside. With a thud, they slammed against the floor, shaking the room. Small rocks fell from above, but the room didn't collapse.

Something was rising out of the hole in the floor.

Worthy watched as a large, gleaming box slowly emerged up into the cavern. It was the same deep black color as the slabs, chiseled with careful precision. All across the edges, scenes of a great cat performing heroic acts glittered, carved in relief into the stone. Once completely out of the ground, the black box creaked to a halt. The smoke thinned out, and the red doors returned to their dark color.

"It's a coffin," Anka said. "It must be the final resting place of Gransfen and the wildcat."

Now that it was all the way out, they could see dull yellow and red jewels covering the rectangular container on all sides. Conor picked up one of the still-lit torches and held it over the coffin. The jewels lit up like stars in the midnight sky.

Worthy noticed something else gleaming on top of the box. Whatever it was, it was covered with soot and dirt. Worthy blew across the top, revealing a silver blade. A thick leather-wrapped hilt shone through the soot, and a large yellow stone, cut into an oval shape, was embedded in the center of the hilt.

The Wildcat's Claw.

Anka started to step toward it, but Rollan stopped her. "I think Conor or Worthy should pick it up," he said. "It's a Euran gift. Someone from this land should activate it."

Conor looked at Worthy. "You deciphered the code," he said. "You should take it."

Worthy shook his head. "Are you sure?"

Abeke placed her hand on his shoulder. "Don't be afraid," she said.

It wasn't that Worthy was afraid. It was more like, he didn't know if he was actually worthy enough to hold the sword. Gransfen and Wilco had been the protectors of an entire land. He was just a kid in a white mask and red cloak trying to make up for his past mistakes.

"Do it, Worthy," Conor said. "I believe in you. We all do."

Worthy nodded, his eyes stinging behind his mask. Then he reached out and grabbed the hilt. The leather hadn't been used in aeons, but it was supple, like it had just been oiled. He lifted the sword and was surprised by how light it was, given its size. It was easily the largest, longest sword he'd ever wielded, but it felt as weightless as a training foil.

He adjusted his grip on the sword and took a few swipes. The metal almost sang as it sliced through the dusty, smoky air.

"Look here," Conor said, pointing. "There's a small incision at the base of the tomb. I think you're supposed to place the sword here."

Worthy began sliding the sword into the opening. The sword sang again as its steel blade scraped against the black stone. Worthy felt it lock in place, and slowly let go.

The room began to rumble, and more rocks and debris fell from the ceiling. The hilt of the sword began to glow. Worthy took a closer look. He realized it wasn't the metal underneath the leather that was glowing. It was the yellow jewel at the center of the sword. If the gems on the tomb were stars, then the jewel on the sword was the shining sun, beaming brightly enough to blind them all.

Smoke began to surround them, this time seemingly coming from all sides of the room, as the jewel shone brighter and brighter. Then the jewel flashed, causing Worthy to cover his eyes.

When he opened them, he saw the image of a man beginning to form from the smoke. Well, not a man. More like a giant. Worthy had to look up to see his face. The man's beard hung to his belt buckle. His face was rough and weathered, similar to the cliff they had traversed, but there was a lightness in his eyes.

"Gransfen," Worthy whispered. He stole a glance at the others. They all stood at attention, with their backs straight and arms taut. Worthy adjusted his body so he looked the same.

“Is he talking yet?” Meilin whispered. “We can’t hear him if he is.”

“No,” Worthy said. “Nothing—”

Who is mighty enough to raise the Wildcat’s Claw? Who is brave enough to wake me from my eternal slumber? Who is—

Gransfen’s eyes became pinholes in the smoke. *Is this the Great Briggan? And Uraza and Jhi?* He looked up at the nook in the ceiling where Essix rested. *This is most unexpected.*

The man’s words felt like they were pounding in Worthy’s head—like a thousand erupting volcanoes. He looked back at the others, waiting for one of them to respond, but only Conor’s expression had changed, his mouth now hanging open.

No matter. Again, who raised my sword? Was it you? Gransfen had leveled a smoky finger at Worthy, who stood closest to the blade.

Worthy gulped, then nodded. “Yes, I raised the sword.” He puffed his chest out and placed his hands on his hips. Hopefully that made him look more commanding. “I am Worthy, of the Redcloaks.”

Gransfen peered at him, a puzzled look coming to his face. *What are you? You do not look Euran. Those eyes ... I would recognize the gaze of a wildcat anywhere.*

“I am of Euran blood,” Worthy said. Slowly, he removed his mask, setting it on the cavern floor at his feet. “But I am also more. I’m part human ... and part wildcat.”

That seemed to please the giant man. *The wildcat is a noble beast. Ferocious. Loyal.* Lowering his hand, Gransfen placed his palm against the stone coffin. *Wilco died protecting me. She died protecting Eura. I was never the same without her. My heart shattered like ice against rock.* He shook his head. *I hoped that death would ease my pain. It has not.*

“What’s he saying?” Rollan asked.

“He’s talking about Wilco,” Conor said.

I sense a strange presence. He leveled his gaze on Rollan. *A bond token is here, one that’s different from ours.*

“Rollan, show him the amulet,” Worthy said. “I think he wants to see the Heart of the Land.”

Rollan quickly pulled the amulet from off his neck. As he held it up, the amber stone began to glow. It pulsed in tandem with the yellow jewel

of the Wildcat's Claw.

Gransfen let off a loud, booming sigh. *Who is its owner?*

"A legendary warrior, like you," Conor said. "These were gifted to our ... our army, but they were hidden away for a reason before we could use them. Do you know why?"

Perhaps because of their strength. Bond tokens are powerful, but also deadly when placed in the wrong hands. Gransfen ran his hand over his long, flowing beard. Long ago, Wilco and I protected Eura from the greatest of dangers. But there were some threats so treacherous that even we could not defeat them alone. There were men who used distrust and division to turn leaders into sheep. To transform the just into the wicked, the sure-footed into timid fools. These men would use fear and hatred to create entire armies. They would channel rage and anger into weapons of destruction and death.

Harmony, and only harmony, could defeat a danger like this.

The ultimate harmony between human and animal. The ultimate trust.

It was Wilco who led me to Suka the Great Polar Bear. There in the frozen wasteland of Arctica, towering above me, Suka showed me the crystal talisman hanging from her claw. Holding it in her massive paws, she displayed its might, leveling a snowcapped mountain one hundred paces away with the slightest wave of her arms. I held out my arms, waiting to receive the gift of such power.

But she refused to turn over her talisman. Instead, she instructed me to create one of my own. My bond token, like her crystal bear talisman, would amplify Wilco's powers. It would be a weapon capable of defeating the largest of armies. If used properly, Wilco and I would be unstoppable.

But it would take true trust, Suka cautioned. One shred of doubt between either Wilco or myself would rip the mystic bonds holding us together. We would be lost to each other forever, both consumed by a cloud of despair that would only be soothed by death itself. Others had tried, she warned. Others stronger and braver than us. Many had failed and had been henceforth doomed to eternal madness.

And even if we were successful, the Great Polar Bear warned, we would have to guard our token for the rest of our lives. The token's power

could be tapped by anyone, not just me. Not just another of the Marked. It could be harnessed whether Wilco was in passive state or not. It could be used by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Its power would live on forever, even after we had departed this world. But if it were destroyed during our lifetimes, we would immediately perish as well, as it was an extension of our bond.

I remember looking at Wilco, my partner. My friend. Her yellow eyes gleamed. She roared into the white, frozen abyss. She was ready. So was I.

I drew my sword, forged with my own two hands, and performed the ritual. I could feel the power flowing between us, rolling like a mist over a swampy land, and I watched as it folded itself into my blade. The yellow stone, a gift from my mother, began to shine like it harnessed the fervor of an everlasting sun.

And then, it was done. The mighty Wildcat's Claw had been forged anew. And with it, we cut down our enemies and feasted on their burned, charred corpses.

Worthy cringed as he said this. That part didn't seem too appealing at all.

Gransfen looked down at the team. *Those that stand before me, are you unified?*

"Say yes," Conor said to the others.

"Yes," they all mumbled.

Are you worthy of these gifts?

"Yes," they said again, watching Conor for the clues.

And are you willing to die to protect one another, and these gifts, even if it leads to your deaths?

"Yes," they said.

Then take the Wildcat's Claw, and fight for all of Erdas. Use its power, and let the mighty wildcat roar once more.

Worthy nodded. "We will," he said as Gransfen's image began to fade away. "I promise." He wrapped his fingers around the sword and pulled it back out of the cleft.

"Yikes!" Rollan said as the ground began to shake. The stone coffin was receding back underground, the air alive with a soft hiss as steam

and smoke once again surrounded them. Then the large slate doors turned fire-red again and began to creak shut, seemingly without anything acting on them to cause them to move.

Once the doors slammed closed, they returned to their black color. The room fell silent. Save for the sword in Worthy's hands, there was no clue that anything magical had happened at all.

"Did you guys hear any of what he said?" Worthy asked.

Rollan shook his head. "It was the same way in Amaya. Only people from the land of the gift can hear the hero's echo."

"The gifts are called bond tokens," Worthy said. "At least, I think that's what he said. He was kind of loud and boomy. My ears are still ringing a little."

"Bond tokens?" Abeke frowned. "I've never heard of that before."

"Actually, you have," Conor said. "They're kind of like the talismans from the Great Beasts." He quickly explained what Gransfen had told him and Worthy about the power of the bond tokens. "And they can be used by anyone, whether you're Marked or not."

"You said we could make these ourselves, right?" Meilin asked. "If that's the case, then why haven't the Greencloaks ever created them? They would be helpful in battle, especially when our spirit animals were still in passive state."

"The Greencloaks have always been secretive about information they consider dangerous," Anka reminded them. "Like the source of the bonding Nectar and the location of Stetriol." She ran a small finger along her chameleon's bumpy back. "Perhaps that's why the nations lost their faith in them."

"They were only doing what was right for Erdas," Abeke said.

"Tell that to all the people in Stetriol and everywhere else that got the bonding sickness, just because the Greencloaks weren't around to personally administer the Nectar," Rollan said. His words were hard and bitter. "Think of all the people who drank the Bile because it was the only way to cure their bonding sickness."

Worthy knew that Rollan was talking about his own mother. Unlike Worthy, Rollan's mother had taken the Bile for noble reasons. To try to

cure herself, so she could find the son she'd been forced to abandon in Amaya.

"There are other reasons to not share that information," Conor said. "If a bond token is destroyed, both the human and the animal partner *die*. Think what would have happened if the Conquerors had known that during the war."

"Maybe that's why the Great Beasts were so protective about their talismans," Rollan said. "I would be, too, if I knew someone could come along and smash it, wiping me from existence."

"Yes, and that's *if* the technique to create one even worked in the first place," Worthy added. He had sat down and was using his cloak to shine the sword. "Gransfen said it required absolute trust between partners. All it would take was one thread of self-doubt to doom both the human and the animal. The bond would break between them. Shattered. Forever." He looked up. "Isn't that right, Conor?"

Conor was looking down at his own spirit animal, as were Meilin and Abeke. Even Rollan seemed to have a faraway look.

"I've had my bond broken before," Abeke finally said. "It isn't something that I'd hope for again."

"Yes," Worthy said. The blade was sharp, and he'd accidentally sliced a hole in his cloak. "But as long as there's complete trust between you and the animal—"

"We should move out," Meilin said, rising. "It will be dark soon."

Worthy looked as his friends, clearly troubled. Perhaps their bonds weren't as strong as he thought they were.

Briggan growled. A second later, so did Uraza.

Worthy stood up. He'd heard it, too. The crunch of pebbles against boot heels. The scrape of metal against rocky walls.

"Get ready, Greencloaks," Worthy whispered. "We're about to have company."

"It must be the Oathbound," Meilin said. "Any clue how many?"

Worthy tried to count all the different footsteps but quickly lost count. "A lot," he finally said. He looked at the others as their faces became stern. "So now what are we supposed to do?"

Abeke slipped her bow off and pulled an arrow from a quiver. “Now we fight.”



THE BATTLE

ABEKE INSTRUCTED CONOR AND MEILIN TO BLOW OUT the torches. Thanks to Briggan's powers, Conor's eyes immediately adjusted to the dark. Abeke had crouched at the opening of the cavern, her body low to the ground. "I'll take out as many as I can. But they'll break through eventually."

Conor pulled out his ax and bounced on his toes. Briggan seemed frisky as well, ready for action. "Try to be patient," he said to the Great Wolf. "Our time will come soon enough."

"Out of all the places to face off, it had to be deep down in an underground cave," Rollan said, patting the amulet underneath his shirt. "That means no earthquake powers for us."

Meilin turned to Worthy. "You seem to know all about the wildcat," she said. "Maybe you can figure out how to activate the Claw's powers."

"It would be great if it could magically transport people to safety." Rollan pulled a dagger from his belt, then another from his boot. "That would be really helpful right about now."

"Quiet," scolded Abeke. "They're almost here."

"Perhaps I should take the gifts," Anka whispered to Conor and Rollan. "If you all can lure enough of the Oathbound out of the passage and here into this room, I may be able to use my powers to slip by undetected."

Conor and Rollan looked at each other. “That’s probably a good idea,” Conor finally said. “Our first priority has to be protecting the bond tokens.”

“Yeah, but a very close second priority should be getting out of this alive,” Rollan added.

Worthy seemed to hesitate as he handed the sword to Anka. Conor had to admit, he looked at ease carrying it. It had made him seem more imposing. More inspiring.

“Do you want me to take the Heart of the Land as well?” Anka asked Rollan as the Wildcat’s Claw disappeared from sight. “I can smuggle it out, too.”

Rollan paused as well before shaking his head. “We should split them up, just in case.” He held up his arm, signaling Essix. “You’d better take this,” he said to the falcon, sliding the leather strap holding the amulet from around his neck. He tied it around one of the bird’s talons. “Now don’t get any fancy, heroic ideas,” he said to Essix. “If this turns ugly, you fly that amulet to safety as fast as you can.”

“*If* this turns ugly?” Meilin said. “We’re talking about an army of soldiers against six. It’s going to get ugly.”

“Meilin, honesty is a currency that doesn’t have to be spent all in one place,” Rollan said.

“I can see them,” Abeke whispered. “Be ready. They’re going to charge as soon as I start firing.”

Abeke closed one eye as she brought the bowstring to her cheek. She waited and waited ... and then released the arrow. A second later, an Oathbound soldier screamed in agony.

“Charge!” someone yelled from the tunnel. The footsteps turned into a thunderous roar.

That must have woken up the bats, because all of a sudden Conor heard them shrieking. Moments later, they spilled into the room in an enormous cloud, their black wings filling all the available space in the cavern.

Conor swiped at the bats with his ax, knocking two to the ground. Briggan snatched another out of the air, shaking it with his massive jaws before flinging it against the wall.

“I can’t see!” Abeke said. “They’re blocking my aim.” She quickly fired off three more arrows, then ducked as the Oathbound returned fire.

“Look alive, Greencloaks,” she said, retreating from the opening. “Here they come!”

The first wave of Oathbound stormed into the cavern. Many had arrows stuck in their arms and shoulders. Spirit animals rushed in with them.

Worthy yowled as he leaped toward a group of three. He quickly knocked two of them against the wall, but the other pierced Worthy’s side, cutting him through his thick red cloak. Worthy yelled, clawing the Oathbound across the arm. The man released a boa constructor, which quickly wrapped itself around Worthy’s neck.

“Hold on, Worthy! We’re coming!” Tapping into Briggan’s strength, Conor flew across the room, his boots barely touching the ground as he ran. He sliced one of the Oathbound with his ax as he passed by, then crashed into the group of soldiers surrounding Worthy, knocking them to the cavern floor. Rolling to his feet, Conor quickly sidestepped a swinging broadsword, then blocked a billy club aimed at his face.

“Ouch!” he yelled, looking down. A lynx had grabbed hold of his leg, right above his boot, sinking its teeth deep into Conor’s flesh.

Before he could shout for help, Briggan appeared, grabbing the animal by the neck. With a loud growl, it ripped the lynx away from Conor.

“Are you okay?” Conor asked, pulling Worthy to his feet. “Did the snake bite you?”

“No, more like I bit it,” Worthy said as he spat out a few yellow-green scales. “And I don’t care what anyone says. It doesn’t taste like chicken.”

More Oathbound rushed toward them. “Back to back,” he said to Worthy. “You take the eight on your side. I’ll take these six.”

“And how exactly is that fair?” Worthy asked, swiping at the men.

Across the room, Meilin and Rollan fought off another group of Oathbound. Meilin’s sword kept four of them at bay while Jhi reared up on her hind legs and swatted the men down. Rollan used both his daggers to simultaneously block and attack the Oathbound. Rollan had a cut against his cheek, but it didn’t look deep enough to slow him.

Conor didn't see Essix in the fray. He hoped that meant the falcon had gotten to safety.

"Oh, no!" Worthy yelled. "Anka's down!"

Conor looked in the direction that Worthy had pointed. Anka, no longer invisible, was slumped against the cavern wall, a stream of blood trickling down her face. The Wildcat's Claw had fallen from her grasp and lay untouched on the floor.

A woman with a ruby-red sword rushed toward Anka. The woman's brown braided hair flopped behind her as she ran.

"She's going for Anka," Conor said. "Come on!"

Conor and Worthy took off, pushing their way through the Oathbound warriors to try to reach Anka and the Wildcat's Claw first. A man with a longsword lunged at Worthy, but Conor jumped in the way, blocking the blade with his ax hilt before it reached Worthy. The warrior then smiled as a meerkat leaped from his back onto Conor's face.

Conor spun around, trying to keep the animal away from his eyes. The meerkat was small, but its claws were sharp. Conor screamed as it raked its paw across his forehead.

"Conor!" Worthy yelled.

"Forget about me," he yelled, dropping to the ground. "Protect Anka and the sword!" Conor rolled around, trying to dislodge the animal from his face. Although his eyes were closed, he could hear Briggan nearby, squaring off with the man with the longsword.

Finally, Conor slammed his head against the ground. It was like being hit in the face with a brick, but the maneuver successfully dislodged the animal. Rising to his feet, Conor kicked the meerkat across the room. Just before it was going to land, Uraza leaped into the air, snagging the beast.

"Bomilo!" the warrior shrieked, running after Uraza.

Conor turned to see that Worthy had made it to the Wildcat's Claw. He knelt before it, but hadn't yet picked it up.

A few paces away, the tall woman warrior stood with a garrison of soldiers behind her. The woman had placed the tip of her ruby-red sword right underneath the unconscious Anka's chin.

She snapped her fingers, and one of the men behind her raised a concave horn to his lips. A low wail echoed through the room. The Oathbound immediately stopped fighting.

“Put down your weapons,” the woman said, moving her blade closer to Anka’s throat. “This battle is over.”



THE WILDCAT'S ROAR

ABEKE WAS JUST ABOUT TO RELEASE ANOTHER ARROW when a loud horn reverberated throughout the room. The Oathbound warriors advancing toward her immediately stopped and began to pull back.

Why are they retreating? she wondered. *Have we won?* She looked at Uraza. The Great Leopard's purple irises showed the same confusion that must have been present on Abeke's face.

Her bow still in her hand, Abeke searched the cave for the others. Meilin and Rollan stood side by side, their weapons lowering slowly. Conor was in the process of setting his ax down on the ground.

Then she saw the woman. Tall and regal, she towered over Anka, a long red sword pointed at the Greencloak's throat. Abeke worried that the woman had killed her, but then she noticed Anka stirring a little.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," the woman said, keeping her blade at Anka's neck while meeting Abeke's gaze. "Either lower your bow, or your friend loses her life."

Abeke stared at the woman, looking for any signs of bluffing or weakness. Gaudy rings circled each of the Oathbound's fingers, serving as a stark contrast to her otherwise drab uniform. The woman sneered, then moved the blade closer to Anka. The tip pierced Anka's skin, drawing a single drop of blood.

Abeke slowly released the tension in her bow. As she placed it on the ground, she noticed Worthy unbuttoning his cloak.

“Just proving that I’m unarmed,” he said as the cloak floated to the ground. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw the glint of a silver blade right before the red cloak fell over it.

Worthy then spun in a circle, just to prove his point. His black tail waved behind him.

“My, aren’t you a peculiar one?” the woman said. “Perhaps I’ll spare you after all. I could add you to my collection. Or perhaps I’ll make you my pet.”

“My name is Worthy,” he said defiantly. “Who are you?”

“I am Cordelia the Kind,” she said. “Haven’t you heard of me?”

Rollan snorted. “The trappers told us about you. You don’t sound very kind to me.”

One of the men pushed Rollan in the back, almost causing him to trip.

“Kindness, like beauty and power, is all a measure of perspective.” Removing the sword from Anka’s throat, she walked over to Worthy. “I *could* use this blade to sever your friend’s tail from his body,” she said. She smiled, then raised her foot and jammed it onto his black tail, grinding it into the rocky ground. Worthy howled, baring his teeth, but didn’t move to strike the woman.

“But wasn’t that a kinder gesture?” Cordelia said, batting her eyelashes.

“Leave him alone,” Abeke said. Beside her, Uraza growled.

Cordelia turned her attention back to Abeke. “Greencloaks, put your spirit animals away. Now.” Once they’d all complied—and Briggan, Jhi, and Uraza disappeared into flashes of color—the woman turned to a group of warriors to her right. “Bring them here,” the woman said. “But be careful. None of them are to be underestimated. If they’re bold enough to kill the emperor, think what they will do to you.”

Abeke jerked away from one of the warriors as he tried to grab her elbow. Holding her head high, she marched to join the others beside Worthy. “We didn’t kill the emperor.”

“Then why did you run?” Cordelia asked. “Why not remain at the Citadel and face trial?”

“The Greencloaks do not answer to bounty hunters like you,” Abeke said. “We heard about how you threatened all the towns in Eura during your search for us.” She shook her head. “Why did you terrorize those people? They’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Harboring fugitives and withholding information is a crime,” she said. “I was merely giving them incentive to cooperate.” She returned her sword to her belt. “And don’t worry, I only burned the homes of half those trappers. I’d threatened to destroy *all* their belongings if they failed me. Again, my kindness has no bounds.”

“The Oathbound aren’t a sovereign military,” Conor said. “You’re mercenaries. You don’t have the right to arrest people.”

“People are afraid. Scared of the Greencloak army that has already destroyed much of this land. They want us here to protect them. Who else is mighty enough to stand against the evil Greencloaks?” She twisted a ring around her finger. “The queen herself has welcomed our assistance in any way, especially when we deliver you to her in six wooden coffins.”

Abeke thought about what Gransfen had said. People, when afraid, would follow anyone. Even a group as twisted as the Oathbound were proving to be. And worse, people would do it willingly.

“But because I am so kind, here’s what I propose,” Cordelia continued. “If you turn over the two gifts you’ve located, I’ll allow three of you to live. You can spend the rest of your lives rotting in a cell.”

“We don’t have them,” Worthy said. “Essix took them both and escaped.”

“And you’ll never catch her,” Rollan added. “Both the gifts are long gone by now.”

Cordelia paused to consider this. Abeke realized that the woman didn’t know what the Wildcat’s Claw looked like. It was the only thing working to their advantage.

Cordelia spun on her heels, then marched to Anka. She knelt in front of her, her lips snarling. “If that is true, why were you trying to escape?” she asked Anka. “Do you have the gifts? Or are you just a coward that hides and runs instead of fighting?”

It only lasted for a moment, but Anka's eyes flashed to the ground, toward Worthy's feet.

"Silly Greencloak," Cordelia said. "Your eyes have already betrayed you." Cordelia rose, then started to move toward Worthy.

Just as she reached him, Worthy thrust his fist into the sky. The Oathbound drew their weapons, but Cordelia held up her hand.

"I have the Heart of the Land," Worthy said, his fist clamped shut. "Move another step, and I'll start an earthquake and bring this entire cave down."

"I don't believe you," she said. "You would kill everyone in here."

"That's better than letting you have the gifts," Worthy said.

Cordelia spun another of the gold rings around her finger. "Nothing is in your hand," she said. "You're lying."

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Worthy replied. His yellow eyes stared back at Cordelia, unblinking.

"Actually, there are two ways," she said. She nodded toward one of the Oathbound who was standing beside her. "Shoot him. Let's see what falls from his hand when his warm body hits the ground."

Worthy's eyes widened as the soldier raised his crossbow. "Fine. You want it? Take it!" He reached back and hurled his hand forward.

Cordelia and every other Oathbound spun and stared, searching for the invisible amulet as it tumbled through the air.

"Liar," she said after a moment, turning back around. "I knew—"

She stopped. Worthy's red cloak was draped across his arm. He held the Wildcat's Claw in his other hand.

"My, my, you really are full of surprises, aren't you?" She shook her head. "That's a nice sword. But how long do you think you'll last with it?" She took the crossbow from the Oathbound holding it and aimed it at Worthy's chest. "My kindness has run its course. Now, where are the gifts? I won't ask again."

Worthy tightened his grip on the sword and took a step forward, placing himself between the Greencloaks and the Oathbound. "Cordelia, let me introduce you to the Wildcat's Claw." As he said the name, the jeweled hilt began to glow, driving all the darkness from the cavern. "Not every gift is as small as an amulet."

She didn't lower her weapon. "Hand it over and I'll let you live." Then she paused. "From what I remember of Euran history, the famed black wildcat didn't have special armor powers like the Amayan gila monster. It couldn't stop arrows in midair."

"That's right," he said. "But haven't you heard of the wildcat's *ROAR?*"

As he said the words, the yellow jewel began to smoke. The sword vibrated in Worthy's hands as it gave off a low, deep rumble. There was a loud boom, and then fire spewed from the jewel like a geyser turned on its side, the orange flames leaping horizontally across the room. The Oathbound nearest to Worthy were immediately set ablaze. Cordelia dropped her crossbow and rolled out of the way before getting singed herself.

Worthy waved the sword at the Oathbound, pushing them back, then looked behind him at Abeke and the others. "Don't just stand there and stare. Attack!"

Abeke rolled, plucking one of her arrows off the ground, and stabbed it in the nearest Oathbound's thigh. As another rushed toward her, she released Uraza in a flash. The leopard raced across the space between her and the attacker, flinging herself at the man. The warrior tried to hit the animal with a quarterstaff, but Uraza easily dodged, and grabbed the end of the weapon as it bobbed in the air. She yanked it from him, then swiped at the man again, slicing his arm.

The Oathbound soldier retreated, but two more arrived in his place. Abeke picked up Cordelia's abandoned crossbow. Not as good as a bow, but it would do. She quickly fired a bolt into one of the men attacking Uraza, then turned and smashed the weapon into another Oathbound's head.

"Head for the mouth of the cave!" Worthy yelled, the Wildcat's Claw still breathing out fire. "I'll hold them off!"

"I've got Anka," Conor said, helping her to her feet. "Let's go."

Rollan and Meilin took the lead, punching and stabbing any soldier that got in their way. Meilin's attacks were almost poetic, the girl spinning and kicking in a way that exuded grace and control. Rollan was

more rough around the edges, slicing and thrusting like a madman, but it was just as effective.

After using the last of her bolts, Abeke flung the crossbow to the side and grabbed a bow and quiver of arrows from an unconscious soldier. As they slowly fought their way forward, she continued to collect and fire arrows at approaching soldiers. Once out of the cave, they rushed toward the waterfall.

“Great,” Rollan said. “Don’t look now, but there are more Oathbound waiting for us.”

Indeed, another set of soldiers had trickled in. Abeke fired an arrow at one of them. He fell as it struck his leg, but there were just too many to stop them all.

“Hold on,” Worthy said. He moved to the front and held the sword steadily before him. Again, fire sprung from the hilt, causing the men to scatter backward.

“Keep moving,” Meilin said. “They’re catching up behind us.”

Abeke turned to look. Sure enough, Cordelia and her men were quickly rushing through the tunnel, swords drawn and crossbows level.

They reached the mouth of the cave. The tall black-carved statue stood just as they’d left it, its shoulders still bearing the crumbling ceiling. Oathbound now stood on two sides of them. The waterfall rushed just behind the forward group.

“We’re flanked on both sides!” Worthy said, turning the fire back toward Cordelia’s group. She and the approaching Oathbound retreated farther down the tunnel, but the others were now freed to attack.

“We should fight our way through and jump,” Rollan said. “It’s our only chance.”

Conor held up Anka with one shoulder and blocked an Oathbound with his free hand, sword meeting ax in a metallic clash. Briggan was a few steps ahead, fighting with a mountain lion. “Didn’t you almost die in that same waterfall?”

Rollan jumped backward as an enemy blade sliced his arm. He would definitely need Jhi’s help once they made it out of here—if they made it out. “There’s a big difference between *almost* dying and actually dying,”

he said. He kicked the soldier in the shin, dropping him, then buried his dagger in the man. "I'd rather take my chance with the rapids."

"They'll just follow us!" Meilin shouted. She now wielded two swords, and was swinging them both to keep the attackers at bay.

Worthy gritted his fanged teeth, still focusing the sword's flames on Cordelia's group. He began to back up and butted against the statue, his back pressed against the black obsidian. Abeke watched as Worthy's face rose to meet the Euran hero's. As his chest swelled, she saw a change in his expression.

"Jump," he said. "I'll hold them off for as long as I can. Try to buy you some time."

Conor shook his head, his eyes wide. "Worthy—"

"Go!" he yelled. "You're wasting precious time."

Conor nodded, then he, Anka, and Briggan leaped through the waterfall. They screamed all the way down. The Oathbound nearest to them hesitated, then jumped after them.

Abeke tried not to dwell on wondering if her friends had made it. She yanked an arrow from a fallen Oathbound and rushed to Worthy's side.

"Rollan and Meilin, you go next," Abeke said. She fired another arrow into one of the Oathbound to their right. "I'll help Worthy hold them off."

Meilin hurled both her swords at the Oathbound she was holding at bay. The blades found their mark, slicing through the men's black uniforms. Then she back-flipped off the ledge into the water.

"Show-off," Rollan muttered, before leaping off after her.

Holding the sword with one hand, Worthy wiped his damp brow. The heat must have been brutal, but he hadn't let up yet. "So how many arrows do you have left?" he asked Abeke. "Maybe a hundred?"

She quickly counted the arrows lying at her feet. "More like three."

"I figured you'd say something like that." Looking up at the statue again, he said, "You and Uraza should make a break for it. I'm right behind you."

Abeke grabbed the last of the arrows and rushed to the edge of the cliff. When she turned around, she saw that Worthy had stopped using

the sword's fire powers. Instead he faced the statue, the sword raised high above his head.

"What are you doing?" Abeke fired her last arrows at the Oathbound. They would reach the mouth of the cave in seconds.

"Remember what you said? United in our mission, but not necessarily in *how* we execute that mission?" He swung the sword over his head, gaining momentum. "Finish the mission. Find the other gifts."

"Worthy, wait!" she yelled. She knew what he was trying to do. "There's no way you can cut through that statue. It's made of solid stone."

"The wildcat had a ferocious roar, but she also had nails and teeth as sharp as diamonds." This time the entire sword glowed. The steel blade had turned shiny blue. "Tell Dawson I was a hero!"

Worthy brought the sword down on the statue. The blade sliced through the black stone with surprising ease, lopping off a chunk of Gransfen's leg. He swung again, completely severing one stone leg. The statue shifted and began to tilt. There was a loud rumble as boulders dropped from the ceiling.

"You fool!" Cordelia yelled, dodging falling debris. "What are you doing?"

"Being a hero!" Worthy shouted back as he sliced the statue one last time. The carving collapsed, as did the roof of the cave it was holding up. Worthy disappeared in an avalanche of boulders, debris, and dust.

Cracks splintered underneath Abeke's feet as the rest of the cave began to fall apart. Turning, she took a flying leap through the waterfall. She looked to her left to see Uraza jump as well, her body arching in the air.

They slammed into the water. Abeke felt like she'd been hit in the stomach with a hammer. Kicking as hard as she could, she reached for the sky while the rapids pulled her along. Surfacing, she caught sight of Uraza and quickly took in a breath before the swirling currents pulled her under again. Abeke crashed into a large submerged boulder, then ricocheted off another.

There was no navigating this river. She was at the mercy of the currents.

She surfaced again, and quickly took in another gulp of air. This time, she couldn't see the leopard. Was Uraza behind her? Ahead of her? Was she—?

Abeke's thoughts were interrupted by a feeling of weightlessness. She hung in the air, almost like she was floating, before her body crashed into the water below.

She had fallen over another waterfall.

Her vision became blurred and pain radiated throughout her limbs. She knew she was bleeding, but she didn't know how badly.

Her body was heavy, as was her mind. She felt herself sinking. Slipping. She tried kicking her legs, but they refused to work.

The water became darker. Her lungs screamed out in pain.

She almost gave up.

But then, something caught her eye. Below her. A flash of gold fur.

Uraza! And she was in trouble.

Ignoring the pain in her lungs, Abeke stretched out to the beast. A second later, the leopard disappeared onto Abeke's arm.

Abeke shook her head, trying to push away the blackness, and kicked toward the surface. She kicked harder than she'd ever kicked before. She pulled at the water, trying to grab it like handfuls of straw, using it to pull herself up toward the light. Toward air. Toward life.

She exploded past the surface. Opening her mouth, she swallowed gulp after gulp of air, her chest heaving with each breath.

She heard splashing around her, and opened her eyes. "We've got you," Conor said as he and Briggan swam to her. "You're safe."

The Great Wolf reached her first, his gray fur wet and slick. She wrapped her arms around him once he was near. "Thank you," she said, rubbing her face into the wolf's coat. Then she quickly looked up. "Where are the others?" she gasped at Conor. "Are they—?"

"They're on shore. Jhi is taking care of Meilin. She's got a bad gash on her leg." Swimming on the one side of Briggan while Conor held fast to the other, Abeke headed to shore. "What about Worthy?" Conor asked. "Is he right behind you?"

Abeke looked at her friend, then shook her head. "He's not coming."



Only a handful of Oathbound had made it out of the cave and over the waterfall. Conor and Meilin had been ready for a fight, but without their numbers or their leader behind them, the mercenaries had retreated into the trees.

Which was probably for the best. The battle had taken a wretched toll on their entire team. Everyone was covered in cuts and bruises, some worse than others. But their physical scars paled in comparison to the loss of Worthy.

Before they left, the Greencloaks chanced a trip back to the waterfall, hoping to find some way back into the cave, but it was completely sealed off. Abeke suggested using the Heart of the Land to dig through, but Meilin slowly shook her head.

“It’s too powerful and imprecise. With a collapse like this, we’d probably end up causing even more cave-ins farther inside.”

Finally, they collected their packs, bid farewell to their friend, and found a safe place to bed down for the night.

They started a fire. A roasted fish sat on the flames, but no one seemed particularly interested in eating. Or in talking. They just sat there, stewing in their own thoughts.

Finally, after hours of staring at the flames, Rollan cleared his throat. “I’ve been thinking ... you know, once the cave started collapsing, I bet there were a bunch of other cave openings that popped up,” he said. “He’s a small guy. He could have found a fissure to squeeze through.”

Meilin reached out and took Rollan’s hand. “Rollan, don’t torture yourself....”

“I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out,” he continued. “All he had to do was get back to the big cavern, right? If he got there, then he had a chance to survive.” Rollan looked around, waiting for someone to buy into his theory. “Right?” he asked, his voice softer.

“And the Wildcat’s Claw is pretty powerful,” Conor said. “He could probably cut his way out.” Conor hugged Briggan as he spoke. “If that blade can cut through a solid stone statue, it can easily carve through a few fallen boulders.”

Meilin sat up, being careful not to uncover the bandage on her leg. “Knowing Worthy, he’s probably already out, hiding in the trees. Just

waiting for the perfect opportunity to reveal himself.”

“That’s Worthy for you,” Abeke added. “Always wanting to be the hero.” Her voice caught as she spoke the words.

No one spoke again for a few minutes. The tears flowed freely down her friends’ faces now, as well as her own. Abeke couldn’t see Anka, but she was sure that she was crying, too.

“We have to find the next gift,” Abeke said.

“What’s the point?” Rollan asked. “We lost the sword. We were supposed to collect all the gifts, remember?”

Anka shook her head, the movement revealing the older Greencloak’s position. “There’s more to the gifts than we realized. They aren’t just symbols; the bond tokens have real power. Olvan sent you after them for a reason. We’ve got no choice but to continue.”

Meilin nodded. “We have to finish the mission. For Erdas. For Worthy.”

“But where do we start?” Abeke asked. “Nilo and Zhong are huge regions. The gifts could be anywhere.”

“Yes, I was thinking about that,” Anka said. “We know the names of the other two items: Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye. So we need a library. Somewhere with a recorded history of the legends of Erdas,” she said. “Any clues where that would be?”

“Greenhaven Castle comes to mind,” Meilin said. “But since that’s off-limits, the only other library I can think of is at the emperor’s palace in Zhong. Which obviously is out of the question, too.”

“I know of a place in Nilo that’s filled with ancient books and records,” Conor said. “As well as someone who’s as old as the spirit animal bond itself.”

Meilin groaned. “Don’t say it,” she warned. “Don’t say it!”

As Conor smiled, Abeke realized that he looked a little like Worthy. “I think we need to see Takoda at the monastery,” Conor continued. “He and the monks have an extensive library. Plus, there’s someone ancient and clever we could also try talking to.”

“And who is that?” Anka asked.

“Kovo,” Meilin muttered, staring into the flames. “Kovo, the Great Betrayer.”

Varian Johnson is the author of eight novels for children and young adults, including the middle-grade capers *The Great Greene Heist* and *To Catch a Cheat*. A former structural engineer, he now lives outside of Austin, Texas, with his family.

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BOOK SEVEN

STORMSPEAKER

Now fugitives, the young heroes must clear their names while evading the ruthless Oathbound. They head for a hidden refuge of learning in Nilo, hoping to discover the locations of the other two gifts. Guarding this knowledge are their old friends Takoda and Xanthe, along with Kovo the Ape.

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A sneak peek of the next



Book Seven

Stormspeaker

By Christina Diaz Gonzalez



WARRIOR'S PATH

ABEKE TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND HELD IT FOR AN EXTRA second before slowly exhaling. From the deck of the ship, in the minutes before daybreak, she could already sense a change in the air. It felt familiar. Even though they were still far away from the savannahs where she'd been raised, the breeze carried the scent, the warmth, the feel of her homeland. Nilo was on the horizon and it couldn't come soon enough.

The five Greencloaks—Abeke, Conor, Meilin, Rollan, and Anka—had been aboard the small ship for several days, and they still had a ways to travel before reaching their final destination in southern Nilo. Abeke was beginning to believe that Uraza's aversion to water was rubbing off on her. All she wanted to do was step foot on solid land ... but they had to press on. Their priority was to hopefully find a clue about the bond tokens in the library of Takoda's former monastery.

But that hope carried an unwanted partner ... someone Abeke and the rest of the team despised. Someone who had also returned to the monastery and who might have a few answers for them.

Kovo.

Even the thought of the Great Ape made Abeke's stomach turn. The gorilla had masterminded both the First and Second Devourer Wars, killing thousands, including Meilin's father. That was something that

couldn't simply be forgotten, even if the new version of Kovo had recently helped them defeat the Wyrms.

The rising sun now streaked the sky with pink and purple rays of light, adding to the beauty of the horizon. Soon Abeke would be seeing Kovo, and she'd have to put aside all her feelings about him.

Abeke stared down into the deep blue water.

Was her anger toward Kovo similar to how people felt about the Greencloaks?

No. She shook away the comparison. It was a different situation. The Greencloaks hadn't acted willingly with the Wyrms ... they'd been infected by its parasites. And the Greencloaks had been framed for the assassination of the Emperor of Zhong. Kovo, on the other hand, had done all those terrible things himself. He had taken the world to the brink of human extinction.

Twice.

The thought of Kovo and his conniving ways sent a cold shiver down Abeke's back, causing her to shudder. She had to keep her guard up around that Great Beast.

"Couldn't sleep?" Rollan asked, joining Abeke on the deck. "Or just enjoying the sunrise?"

"Neither." Abeke sighed. "Just thinking."

"Yeah, me too." Rollan leaned his back on the rail. "This rickety old ship hasn't been treating us too bad. Then again, it still has another week to go."

Abeke smiled. The Greencloaks had been lucky that Dawson, after hearing about his brother, had insisted on helping them get out of Eura. Thanks to him they had supplies, weapons, a ship, and a two-man crew of old fishermen, Milo and Keane.

"I was actually thinking about Kovo," Abeke admitted. "Not looking forward to seeing him again."

"Can you imagine how Conor feels? Last time he was in the waters around Takoda's monastery was when he became infected with the Wyrms' parasite. This really can't be easy for him."

"You're right. I hadn't even ..." Abeke sighed. She'd been so wrapped up in returning to Nilo that she hadn't stopped to think about

Conor. “Have you talked to him? Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Meilin said, walking toward them from the bow of the ship. “He’s a Hero of Erdas. He’s a survivor.”

“I was thinking ...” Anka suddenly appeared next to them. Her chameleon-like abilities still made Abeke uneasy. Abeke had always prided herself in her hunting skills, but this diminutive Greencloak seemed to confound her senses. “If the library doesn’t have any information on the bond tokens, will Kovo tell us if he knows anything? I mean, he helped you with the Wyrms, but that was because the whole world was in peril. He’s not a fan of humans ... or Greencloaks.”

“Maybe being bonded to Takoda has changed him,” Rollan said. “Given him a different perspective.” He glanced up at Essix circling above the ship. “Our spirit animals have changed *us*. And I’d like to think we’ve changed them, too.”

Just as Rollan finished, Essix screeched and dove past the port side, buzzing right over the top of Rollan’s head as if in protest. Essix was stubborn and headstrong, but there was no denying she had a soft spot for Rollan. They worked well together, each one fiercely independent yet always loyal.

Meilin snickered. “You’ve really changed her.”

“Very funny, Essix!” Rollan shouted. “Way to support my point.”

Essix flew around the ship one more time before coming to rest at the top of the mast.

“Maybe Essix saw something.” Conor emerged from belowdecks, a concerned look on his face. He stepped closer to the railing and looked out at the horizon. “In fact, I was coming up to tell you that maybe we shouldn’t go to the monastery at all.”

Meilin placed a hand on Conor’s shoulder. “Conor, it might be difficult for you, after what happened with the Wyrms—”

“That’s not it,” he interrupted. Conor took a step back and looked at the rest of the group. “I had a vision. It was brief, not a full one like I’ve had before with the big wave, but I think we have to go somewhere else.”

“Where?” Abeke asked, quietly pleased at the thought of avoiding Kovo. “What did you see?”

“It was an enormous hole, or maybe a deep crater, and it had three land bridges ... one on top of the other.” Conor closed his eyes for a moment. “It also had a waterfall flowing from the top, past the three bridges, and into a pool at the bottom.”

“And a token was there?” Anka inquired. “Like with the Wildcat’s Claw, where it was hidden behind the waterfall?”

Conor shook his head. “I don’t think so, but it’s the first step in finding them. I’m certain of that. And it felt like we weren’t too far away.”

“Sounds like you’re describing the sinkhole of the Taabara Chasm,” Abeke said. “It’s not too far from here in the northern part of Nilo.”

“Northern Nilo ... I like the sound of that!” Rollan grinned broadly. “Less time being seasick always sounds good to me.”

“Well, at least you’ve been with your spirit animal,” Meilin pointed out. “None of us have had ours during the voyage. It’ll be good to bring them out.”

“Maybe we should split up,” Conor said, just as Essix shrieked and took flight again. “A few of us go to the sinkhole while the rest continue on to see Takoda.” Conor frowned. “Just in case my vision is wrong.”

“I don’t know,” Anka replied. “I think staying together is a better idea.”

“Me too.” Abeke reached over and gave Conor’s forearm a squeeze. They had been through so much together, and she trusted his instincts. “I believe in your visions.... They haven’t been wrong yet.”

“Plus, sticking together might prevent a repeat of what happened with ...” Rollan didn’t finish the sentence. He had almost broken their unspoken rule.

A hush fell over the group. The experience of having lost Worthy in the cave-in was still raw for everyone. It was all they’d discussed during the first days, but then one morning, without anyone saying a word on the matter, they had stopped talking about it. It wasn’t that they weren’t thinking of him; they just had to place their full attention on the task at hand. Their survival depended on it.

From that point forward there was no more wondering if they had done the right thing in leaving, no more worrying whether Worthy had

made it out alive, no more fearing that the Wildcat's Claw had been found by the Oathbound. The focus was on their mission. They had to find the two remaining bond tokens, Stormspeaker and the Dragon's Eye.

Anka broke the silence. "Abeke, do you know how long it'll take to get to the Taabara Chasm?"

Abeke shrugged. "Not long, but I'd have to check the map. Hold on."

Abeke sprinted belowdecks, grabbed the map of Nilo, and hurried back to her friends.

"Look." She opened it up and pointed to a spot in the ocean near the northern coast of the continent. "We're somewhere in this area. We can tell Milo and Keane to change course and go toward this river." She ran her fingers down the coastline to the mouth of a river, traced its path inland, and stopped at a place close to some mountains. "Once we dock we can make our way across the savannah, past this hilly area, and the Taabara Chasm should be right there. We might even make it there by tonight or tomorrow morning." She paused for a moment. "Maybe. I think."

"Then it's set." Rollan thrust his finger toward the sea and grinned. "Onward! To Taabara Chasm!"

"Um, yeah ..." Meilin rolled her eyes at Rollan's over-the-top rally call, but she couldn't help smiling. "How about I simply go tell Milo and Keane that we've had a change of plans?"

"Just remember ..." Conor hesitated, rubbing the faint mark the Wyrms had left on his forehead. "Taabara may only be the beginning, and not the end. I have a feeling that the bond tokens won't be easy to find."

"Well, since when have things been easy for us?" Abeke gave Conor a wink. "We like a challenge."

"Yeah, I guess." Conor turned to face the coastline, lost in his own thoughts.



The sun was directly overhead when they climbed into the small rowboat. There were no ports in the area, so Milo had anchored the ship in the middle of the river and Keane would now row with them to shore.

“So, how long should we wait for you to return?” Keane asked as they approached the riverbank lined with papyrus reeds.

Abeke bit her lip. She wanted to have access to the ship, but it didn’t seem fair to leave the two old men stuck in the middle of nowhere. “The thing is ... we aren’t sure how long we’ll be away.”

“Well, Dawson paid us for two weeks of travel,” Keane replied. “And we’ve got about a week’s worth of food left, so it’s your call.”

“Could you wait here for a couple of days and then head somewhere back along the coast?” Rollan suggested as the boat drifted closer to the river’s edge.

“Sure.” Keane nodded. “I have a sister in Badir; it’s a small port town not too far away. We could meet up there. I’ll give you two more weeks, as Dawson paid us ... That’s about all I can take of my sister anyway.”

“Badir sounds good.” Meilin threw a backpack filled with supplies over her shoulder as the rowboat hit the first of the papyrus reeds. “We’ll meet you there if we don’t make it back here in time.”

“Good luck!” Keane called out. The five Greencloaks jumped out of the boat and into water that was about two feet deep.

Abeke slogged through the river, pushing aside reeds while her feet sank in the sand and silt with every step she took. Finally the ground became firmer and she climbed up on dry land. Once she was out of the reeds and onto the grass of the savannah, Abeke took a deep breath, relishing the hot sun that beat down on her.

She was home.

And only one thing was missing from the scene.

Abeke pushed aside her cloak and held out her arm. “Join me, Uraza.”

The leopard appeared in a flash of light and raised her head to face the sun. The large cat’s nostrils twitched as she took in the Niloan air and softly let out a contented purr.

“I know.” Abeke stroked Uraza’s arched back as they took in their surroundings. “I did the same thing. It’s good to be home.” The tall golden grass of the savannah rippled with the soft breeze. The rocky hills they’d have to cross loomed not too far in the distance.

Uraza stretched her legs. Abeke knew what the leopard wanted. “Go,” she whispered.

Uraza immediately jumped through the tall grass, then raced across the savannah toward the hills at full speed. Abeke knew the joy Uraza felt at being free. How fun it would be to race along with her, to hunt for their next meal and savor the midday sun that was baking her shoulders. But now was not the time. They had a mission.

“Uraza’s as happy as I am not to be on that ship anymore,” Rollan observed. The tall grass moved with the leopard, rustling as she sprinted back and forth. “Aren’t you bringing out Briggan, Conor?”

Conor wiped the back of his neck and looked up at the cloudless blue sky. “Think I’ll wait until the day isn’t quite so hot.”

“This is Nilo,” Abeke warned. “If it’s daytime, it’s going to be hot.”

Essix circled the group, screeched to establish her presence in the sky, then flew away once more.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re moving,” Rollan responded to the falcon’s cry. He adjusted his green cloak, backpack, and canteen. “Everyone have their stuff?” Rollan asked.

“Since when are you the responsible one?” Meilin teased.

Rollan smiled. “Since I realized that I’d have to share my water if someone forgot theirs.”

“Really?” Conor could barely hide his smile. “You mean to say you wouldn’t share with Meilin?”

Abeke heard Anka giggle, even though she could no longer be seen.

They were all aware of the feelings between Rollan and Meilin, but no one usually said anything. It was only confirmed by the occasional reddening of Meilin’s cheeks and Rollan’s quick interest in changing the topic of conversation.

“We’re wasting time.... Let’s go.” Meilin marched ahead, leaving the group behind before Abeke could check to see if her face had turned pink once again.

As the team trekked toward the Taabara Chasm, a few puffy white clouds began to gather, providing occasional relief from the heat. The terrain also changed from the grasses of the savannah to rocky hills dotted with trees. In the distance, what had at first looked like hills quietly morphed into amber colored mountains, with scattered patches of green.

Stopping for a quick break under the shade of a wide-branched cypress tree, Conor released Briggan. The wolf burst onto the scene and, with his tail wagging, pounced on Conor, knocking him to the ground.

“Whoa,” Conor laughed as Briggan placed his two front paws on Conor’s chest and raised his snout to sniff the air. Conor ran his hand through the Great Wolf’s gray-white fur while the wolf’s cobalt-blue eyes analyzed everything. “Sense anything?”

Briggan glanced down at Conor before giving him a quick lick on his forehead. The wolf jumped off to further inspect their surroundings.

“Ha, I would take that as an all clear,” Anka said, her body blending with the tree trunk she was leaning against.

Abeke opened up the map and checked their location. From the look of things, it seemed like the sinkhole that formed the Taabara Chasm should be close by.

“Are we headed in the right direction?” Meilin asked.

“Think so,” Abeke answered, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. She scanned the land for a small stream that might feed into the waterfall of the chasm.

Briggan let out a long howl from somewhere in the distance.

Rollan stretched out his hand to help Conor up. “Sounds like your partner may have found something of interest.”

Conor grinned. “Leave it to Briggan to be here five minutes and already track something down.”

As they all headed toward the sound of Briggan’s howl, Rollan shook his canteen. “I really hope he’s found some fresh water, because I’m almost out.”

Abeke shook her head. “Hm, who was talking about having enough supplies so we wouldn’t have to share water later? Oh yeah, that was you.”

“Hey ...” Rollan shrugged, a mischievous smile on his face. “These muscles need the extra hydration.”

At that remark everyone laughed out loud.

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” Rollan mumbled.

Soon, the group came upon a small stream where Briggan and Uraza had both decided to lounge by its edge.

“Look at those two.” Meilin pointed. “They’re like—”

“Shhh.” Abeke touched her ear. “Listen.”

Besides the gurgling sound of the water bouncing off of several rocks in the stream, there was a louder, crashing sound of rushing water cascading down somewhere.

“The waterfall has to be nearby,” Abeke said as Rollan filled his canteen with water. “It’s got to be downstream.”

Abeke and the group followed the stream until the ground dropped, disappearing into a giant sinkhole. From where they stood, at the very edge of the deep crater, they could see the stream cascade down past three land bridges, each of which seemed to bisect the hole at different depths.

“Now what?” Rollan asked, looking down. “Do we go down into that giant rabbit hole, cross one of the bridges, or stay up here?”

“In my vision, I could see the gorge’s opening high overhead. The water seemed to be falling from above.” Conor patted Briggan, who had now rejoined them. The wolf nuzzled his hand. “So, I think we have to go to the bottom.”

“Yeah,” Rollan sighed. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Abeke looked at the western sky, where the sun was already hanging low. They had made good time, but it would be much darker in the gorge. Any remaining light would soon disappear. She could already hear a nightingale chirping in the distance. If they were going to go, they needed to be quick about it.

“What do you think, Uraza?” Abeke asked the leopard, who was peering over the edge right next to her. “Should we head down and see if there’s anything down there? Or wait until morning?”

Uraza responded by leaping off the rocky ledge onto the path toward the bottom.

“Guess that’s your answer,” Meilin said, following Uraza with a jump of her own. She looked back up at the rest of the group. “Come on!”

Once at the bottom of the crater, Meilin released Jhi. The Great Panda lumbered over to Meilin, and their foreheads touched. The genuine affection between the two was obvious to Abeke. Then Jhi waddled over to where Briggan and Uraza were lapping up water from the edge of the

small pond. The entire team spread out, hunting for a clue as to why Conor's vision had brought them here.

Abeke first searched behind the waterfall, hoping that there might be a cave like in Eura, but there was nothing there.

"Maybe it's like the Heart of the Land." Rollan touched the token that hung under his shirt. "Hidden within a rock somewhere."

"There are a million rocks here, though," Anka said.

"How about hidden along a path?" Conor pointed to a narrow chasm through the mountain walls.

Abeke walked over to him. "Are you saying we should go through there?" The opening would require them to enter single file. If it got much narrower, their spirit animals would certainly not fit. As it was, Jhi already couldn't enter.

"See how the ground is worn down in spots?" He pointed to the rock floor. "I think this is a path that's been used before. Used a lot."

Meilin and Rollan joined them, each peering into the long, narrow chasm.

"We should explore in there before it gets much darker," Meilin said. "Don't you think, Rollan?"

Rollan didn't answer. He only stared into it.

"Rollan?" Conor repeated his name.

Meilin placed a hand on Rollan's shoulder. "You're thinking of Tarik, aren't you?" she said. "The last battle you fought with him."

"It looked a lot like this place," he muttered. "Same type of chasm. A warrior's last path."

"But it's not that place, and we aren't battling the Devourer or the Conquerors," Meilin replied in a gentle voice.

Suddenly a sense of unease filled Abeke. This *would* be a good place for an ambush. She glanced around, her hunter instincts on full alert.

It was too quiet.

Even the nightingale had stopped singing. Something was off.

"I think we should get out of here," Abeke said in a hushed voice. "Maybe have Essix see if—"

Before Abeke could finish her sentence, a hooded figure jumped down and twirled a quarterstaff in front of them.

“Now!” came a shout from above, and suddenly warriors wearing gray cloaks rained down all around them.

First, one dropped behind Abeke. Then another in front. Then two more blocked the path forward through the chasm.

Abeke pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it to her bow, just as Meilin drew out her sword.

In a split second, more than two dozen cloaked figures had jumped down from the cliffs ... all pointing their weapons at the five Greencloaks or at their spirit animals over by the pond. High above all of them, balanced on the natural bridge, another dozen attackers stood with arrows trained on Abeke and her friends.

There was no escape.... They were trapped!



GIANT HAIRBALL

FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE WAS NEVER ROLLAN'S FIRST choice. He had learned on the streets of Concorba that diplomacy could work wonders. Words often yielded better results than any sword. Disarm them with a smile whenever possible.

Rollan quickly assessed the situation. Jhi, Briggan, and Uraza were surrounded, but they would be able to take care of themselves. The four Greencloaks had taken defensive stances against the hooded warriors, but Rollan wasn't sure where Anka had gone. She'd camouflaged herself so well that he couldn't see her at all. What Rollan *could* see was that these people weren't dressed in all black like the Oathbound.

Perhaps he could convince them that they weren't enemies.

"Friends, friends." Rollan lowered his dagger and took a step toward one of the figures. "We mean you no harm." He acted calm, as if the Greencloaks had the upper hand, instead of the other way around.

"Rollan ..." Meilin's voice carried a warning that this approach might not be the best idea.

Rollan ignored her. She was a warrior at heart. Her instinct was always to fight. But he had to use his gut. He took another step. "We aren't here for a battle. We're only in search of something. Perhaps you could help."

The response came quick and swift. The hooded figure in front of him spun his quarterstaff in the air, then swung it low at Rollan's knees, trying to knock his legs out from under him.

Rollan jumped over the end and quickly grabbed the pole, yanking it out of the hooded figure's hand and turning it on him.

So much for diplomacy.

"STOP!" a voice called from above. A hooded warrior appeared from an opening near one of the land bridges. The figure ran along a path to the bottom, leaping down the last few feet to skid to a halt right in front of Rollan. "Don't harm these people. These *are* our friends."

Rollan couldn't believe it.... His plan had worked.

The cloaked figure pulled back his gray hood.

"TAKODA!" Meilin exclaimed.

Takoda smiled and rushed over to be embraced by Meilin, Abeke, Conor, and Rollan. "I'm so glad that you're all safe!" he exclaimed, but then lowered his voice to a whisper. "I heard what happened with the Emperor of Zhong. How could the Greencloaks do something like that? What's going on?"

"It was a setup by people impersonating us," Meilin answered. "We're trying to make things right again."

Takoda didn't hesitate. "How can I help?" he asked. "Do you want me to go with you somewhere? Maybe give you a place to hide with the monks?"

Rollan stared at Takoda. The boy had grown about four inches since he'd last seen him. He'd also become more muscular.

But along with Takoda came Kovo, who was bonded to the young monk. Rollan didn't love the idea of traveling with the once subjugator of Erdas. "Have you heard of something called Stormspeaker ... or the Dragon's Eye?"

Takoda shook his head. "What are they?"

"Important items we need in order to clear our names and unite Erdas," Conor explained. "We believe at least one of them is found in Nilo."

Murmuring had risen from the cloaked figures. The monks still had their weapons trained on the group and their spirit animals.

“Takoda, what’s going on?” someone shouted.

Takoda turned around. “Everyone, please ... lower your weapons.” He pushed down the spear of one of the nearby monks. “These are my friends, the ones I’ve told you about. The ones who helped defeat the Wyrms. The Heroes of Erdas. We should be welcoming them, not threatening them.”

Briggan growled at one of the hooded monks and Rollan could see Uraza’s muscles tense and tauten. Even Jhi was staring down the person in front of her.

“Place your spirit animals in passive state,” Takoda whispered. “The monks won’t relax if they’re out.”

Meilin, Abeke, and Conor glanced at each other. They each quietly nodded and called back their animals.

Rollan could see the hesitation among the monks, but they slowly put away their weapons and pulled back their hoods in an apparent symbol of acceptance.

Takoda had risen to become a leader in his community. This was definitely not the same boy Rollan had first encountered moping in Greenhaven. The battles underground against the Wyrms had clearly changed him ... or was it Kovo’s influence? Had the bond between him and the Great Beast caused him to grow in his command of others? Was it just a sign of growing up? Rollan wasn’t sure. Perhaps Kovo had changed, too. Doubtful, but anything was possible.

“Do you know someone who might help us?” Meilin asked.

Rollan feared that the answer would be Kovo, but Takoda surprised them. “I don’t know *someone* with answers, but I know *someplace* that might have them. Come with me.” Takoda motioned for the group to follow him into the chasm.

“No!” The monk who had attacked Rollan leaped forward, blocking the entrance. “You can’t take them into Mabtaka. You’d be placing everyone and everything at risk.”

“Step aside, Sodu.” Takoda stared him down. “I think I’ve earned the right to bring four guests, four *friends*, into our community.”

Sodu didn’t back off. “They’re wanted by the Oathbound! I’ve heard the rumors of what happens to those who help Greencloaks. We can’t

allow them entrance. The library has never been seized, because strangers are not permitted inside.”

“These four aren’t strangers,” Takoda argued. “They’re known to everyone.”

“Ahem,” Anka cleared her throat. She took two steps forward, away from the mountain wall where she had been camouflaging herself, and allowed herself to be seen. “There’s five of us, actually.”

Takoda spun around. He hadn’t noticed her, even though she’d been standing so close to him.

“Anka’s with us,” Meilin quickly explained. “Her spirit animal is a chameleon. We can vouch for her, though.”

“You see!” Sodu mocked Takoda. “You can’t even recognize danger when it’s right next to you.” He turned to the monks as Anka blended back into the colors of the mountain. “My brothers, we cannot let them enter. There’s no telling what will happen if they do. We would be putting everything at risk.”

“What I see”—Takoda spoke to Sodu through clenched teeth—“is someone who pretends to be strong, but is afraid of his own shadow.”

“Look who’s talking!” Sodu exclaimed. “The boy who couldn’t be trusted to travel alone, but who required the guidance of a superior student to accompany him to Mabtaka.”

Takoda eyes narrowed. “And when none could be found, they told me to bring you.”

“Ha! Nice try, but we all know the truth,” Sodu scoffed. “You are still only a boy.”

“We’ll see about that.” Takoda sneered and took a few steps forward. He lifted his arms and addressed the other monks in a loud, booming voice. “Brothers and sisters, you all know me and trust my judgment. These are my friends, the ones who defeated the Devourer and then helped destroy the Wyrms. They are the Heroes of Erdas who have selflessly risked everything for Nilo ... for the entire world. They come to us seeking answers and rest ... something only we can offer. Isn’t it our duty to share our knowledge with the righteous and stand against the Oathbound? Will you not rise up, stiffen your resolve, and aid them?”

There were whispers among the monks. A sense of purpose was filling the cavern.

“We are being called to be *part* of history,” Takoda continued, “instead of just preserving the historical accounts. We cannot turn our backs on those who defended us. We have a duty, so I ask you ...” He paused for a moment, capturing everyone’s attention. “Who will join me in leading these heroes to find the answers they seek? Who stands with me and with the Heroes of Erdas?”

“I do!” shouted one monk.

“As do I!” yelled another.

“I DO!” hollered the remaining monks in unison. All except Sodu, who stayed silent with his arms crossed.

“To the Heroes of Erdas!” Takoda shouted, raising a fist in the air.

“THE HEROES OF ERDAS!” the monks roared back.

“Glad he’s on our side,” Rollan whispered to Conor as he followed Takoda into the chasm.

As the Greencloaks walked through the narrow passage, it continued closing in on either side. Soon it was impossibly tight, like a fissure running up the mountain. As night fell and the light waned, Takoda lit a small lantern. Rollan glanced up the steep rock walls at the sliver of dark sky above them. He knew Essix was flying above them somewhere, giving them protection from the air.

“So what’s the deal with your friend Sodu?” Rollan asked Takoda. “Not the friendliest monk I’ve seen ... not that I’ve actually seen any before today. Except for you, of course.”

“Yeah, we have some history,” Takoda explained. “We were together at the other monastery before I bonded with Kovo. After everything that happened with the Wyrms, we were both sent here. He’s not my biggest fan.”

Rollan chuckled at the understatement. “You think?”

“Almost there!” Takoda called back to the others as the path opened up to a ledge high up on a mountain.

“Finally. I was wondering when we’d get ... whoa!” Rollan waved his arms, trying to maintain his balance as Takoda yanked him back. In the

darkness, he had misjudged where the ledge ended and almost stepped off.

“We’re about two hundred feet up and it’s a straight drop,” Takoda warned.

“A little more notice next time,” Rollan muttered over the pounding of his heart.

“Wow,” Conor said as he stepped onto the ledge. “I didn’t even realize the incline was taking us so high.”

“The monastery is up there.” Takoda pointed to a few twinkling lights in the distance. The moonlight revealed enough of the monastery that Rollan could tell it had been built into the mountainside, about two thirds of the way to the top.

“Guess we have to take one of these rope ladders the rest of the way up?” Rollan tugged on a pair of old ropes with wooden rungs fastened between them. None of it looked very sturdy. “It’s about another two hundred feet?”

“Two fifty,” Takoda corrected.

“This could explain why you don’t get many visitors,” Meilin added. “Though it does remind me of parts of Zhong.” She grabbed the first ladder’s wooden rung and hoisted herself up.

“Before we all get there, I, um ...” Takoda suddenly seemed unsure of himself.

“Spit it out,” Meilin said.

“Yeah, so, I was going to ask that you not bring out Uraza, Briggan, or Jhi when we get up there. Maktaba is well, a sort of *particular* place, if you haven’t noticed. Not that I don’t want them around, but I’m not sure what the reaction would be.”

“From who?” Abeke asked. “The monks or Kovo?”

Takoda sighed. “Both, I guess.”

They all knew there was no love lost between their spirit animals. Kovo had killed the Four Great Beasts during the First Devourer War and had in turn been killed by them during the second. They had reluctantly worked together to defeat a common enemy, but no one truly knew what would happen if they were thrust together again. Still, Rollan didn’t like the idea of having to accommodate *Kovo*.

“I think Kovo will just have to figure it out,” Abeke said in a cool, unforgiving voice. “We’ve all had to deal with him.”

“But we’re guests,” Conor reasoned. “Let’s not stir up any trouble.”

“Kovo is different now,” Takoda said as they each began climbing the ladders. “You’ll see.”

Rollan was about to make a joke when he glanced down at the steep drop to the bottom and felt his head spin. Devastating quips would have to wait, since he needed all his concentration not to fall. As they continued up the mountain, the glow of the moon rising over the adjacent mountain peak cast a dim light over their surroundings. It was nighttime, but Rollan wasn’t looking anywhere except at the rung right above him. It seemed like everyone was focused on the climb, because no one spoke. In fact, all Rollan could hear were the occasional grunts and sighs as someone paused to catch their breath before pressing on.

Once they arrived at the monastery, Rollan turned to look back at the view. An enormous sense of peace washed over him. It was a combination of the beauty of the thousand stars above him and the moon rising silently in the sky. Wind whispered past the oil lanterns lighting the entrance to Maktaba. For the first time in weeks he felt safe, a security provided by the remote location.

“Nice, huh?” Takoda smiled, taking it all in as if for the first time. “Just be careful with the thorns that line the bushes near the entrance.” He waited for the remaining Greencloaks and then motioned for them all to follow him. “Come on, I think someone may want to see you.”

“I doubt it,” Abeke muttered as she walked past Rollan.

Rollan nodded in agreement. Kovo couldn’t have changed that much.

The group passed several monks in the wide corridors who silently stared as they walked by.... It seemed that word of their arrival was spreading throughout the monastery.

“This is the Great Hall,” Takoda said, entering a large room where oil lamps hung from the many rafters that crisscrossed the vaulted ceiling. There were a few monks eating at one of the long dining tables on the right side of the room, and a fire burned in the massive fireplace on the opposite end. “Figured you might want to stop and get something to eat before—”

“MEILIN! CONOR!” someone shouted while running down a darkened staircase in the corner. “ROLLAN! ABEKE!”

Takoda smiled. “Told you someone would want to see you.”

A girl with white hair and almost translucent skin rushed into the light.

It was Xanthe, the Sadrean warrior Meilin and Conor had met while battling the Wyrms underground. “I can’t believe you’re all here!” She hurried over and pulled Meilin close to her. “Takoda and I heard about what happened to your surface elder—er, emperor. How could—”

“It wasn’t us,” Meilin explained. “They were imposters.”

Xanthe tapped Takoda in the chest with the back of her hand. “What did I tell you? I knew it couldn’t be real Greencloaks.”

“And since when are you a monk, Xanthe?” Conor teased. “Or are you here for another reason?”

Takoda blushed at the insinuation, but Xanthe simply rolled her eyes. “I’m here to give a record of my people’s history. Preserve the Sadrean stories for future generations.”

“How are things in Sadre now?” Meilin asked.

“Still recovering. Phos Astos will never be the same, but it’s being rebuilt ... slowly.”

“Sounds like several places we’ve seen,” Anka said.

Xanthe scanned the room. “Who said that?”

“Oh,” Meilin spun around. “That’s Anka. I forgot to introduce the two of you. Anka, Anka, where are you?”

“Right here.” Anka stepped away from a purple curtain in a dark corner of the room, her skin and clothing changing from purple to their natural coloring. “Don’t mind me. Nobody does. Pleasure to meet you, Xanthe.”

“Uh, yes, nice to meet you, too,” Xanthe replied as Anka moved into the shadows and blended back into her surroundings.

That was when the group noticed him: a large looming figure who sat in the darkest corner of the space, draped in shadow and staring out the window. His massive back was turned to the group, but there was no mistaking him.

Kovo.

“Guess we don’t merit even a glance from him,” Abeke speculated.

“That’s not it,” Takoda explained. “Ever since we stopped the Wurm, Kovo’s gone almost completely silent. He rarely communicates with me, and he refuses to go into passive form.”

Rollan cautiously drew closer to the Great Ape. “Is something wrong? Did someone take his banana away?”

Takoda shook his head. “It’s part of his healing journey. Being here has given him the peace to deal with the things he’s done in the past. He wants, no, he needs time for himself.”

“Hmpf.” Meilin didn’t seem to be buying it.

“So he won’t be able to give us information on Stormspeaker or the Dragon’s Eye?” Conor asked.

“Afraid not,” Takoda said. “He won’t react to anyone.” He looked to one of the corridors, where some of the monks were carrying trays of food. “I’ll get you some dinner. Sit and rest for a moment.”

Xanthe escorted them to one of the tables. “So those things you mentioned ... what are they?”

“Important gifts we have to find for the Greencloaks,” Abeke said, being purposefully vague.

“It’s too bad Kovo can’t help,” Xanthe said.

“We’ll see about that.” Rollan got up from the table and walked over to Kovo. He stood directly in front of the gorilla, looking up at him.

“Rollan ...” Meilin didn’t sound pleased. “What are you doing?”

“I want to see if he’s really as unaware as he’d have us believe.” Rollan clapped his hands loudly in front of Kovo’s red eyes, but the giant gorilla didn’t even blink.

“Rollan!” Abeke raced over and pulled Rollan away just as he began waving his hands in front of Kovo’s face.

“Are you crazy?” Abeke shook her head in disbelief. “Kovo could toss you out that window!”

“We need answers, right?” Rollan broke away from Abeke’s grip and returned to stand in front of Kovo. “Listen, you giant hairball, we need to find Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye. If you’re as smart as you pretend to be, prove it by telling us where they are.”

Silence.

Rollan stood on his toes to get eye-to-eye with Kovo. “You really are one ugly, selfish—”

“Rollan!” Takoda had returned, carrying a tray with several plates of food.

Rollan continued. “Foul-smelling, mangy, good-for-nothing, waste of —”

Takoda slammed the tray down on the table and began marching toward Rollan.

“An unwise move, brave Amayan warrior,” an unfamiliar voice called out from the hall’s entryway, stopping Takoda in his tracks. “Best not to taunt someone who can later exact revenge. Kovo can hear you, he only chooses not to react ... yet.”

Rollan’s mouth twitched and he swallowed the lump that had formed in the back of his throat. He peered around Kovo’s massive chest and saw an old man, his back bent down with the weight of the years, leaning on a gnarled, wooden cane for support. “Yes, well, I was only trying to provoke a reaction, so he’d snap out of it and help us.”

“Reacting out of anger or fear is rarely a good decision. A lesson for Kovo ... and perhaps for you.”

Rollan was about to respond when Takoda interjected.

“Everyone, I want to introduce you to the Honorable Naveb of Maktaba.” He paused as the old man gave the group a slight nod. “He’s one of our esteemed elders and our greatest librarian. He knows where to find all sorts of secrets.”

Meilin bowed in acknowledgement of the elder. “Sir, we’re looking for information about—”

“Yes, yes.” The old man raised a hand. “I may be old, but I could still hear the instigator over there while he was tormenting Kovo.”

“That’s not exactly what ...” Rollan stopped speaking as Abeke gave him a gentle nudge. Silence was a virtue that often escaped Rollan.

“I see you’re from this land.” Naveb motioned to Abeke. “I hope you are brighter than your friend there.”

“Sir,” Abeke responded with respect. “We each have our unique strengths, which—”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Naveb turned around. “Well, come on. Grab your food and let’s go. I’m not getting any younger.” He headed down a dimly lit hallway. “We have work to do ... if you can pass the test.”



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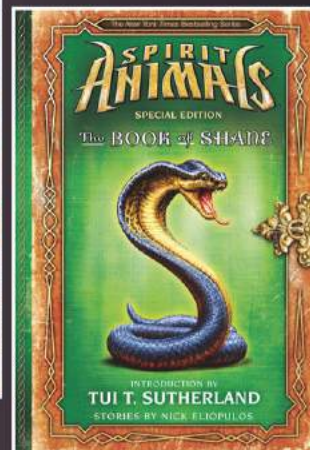
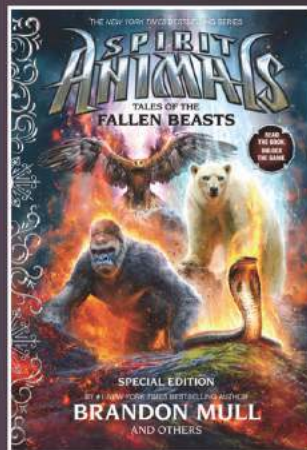
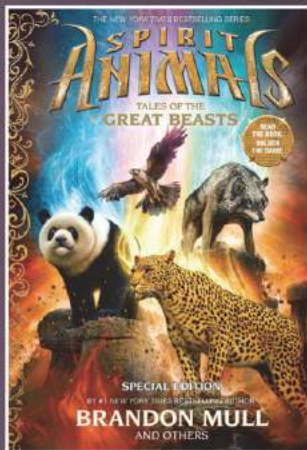


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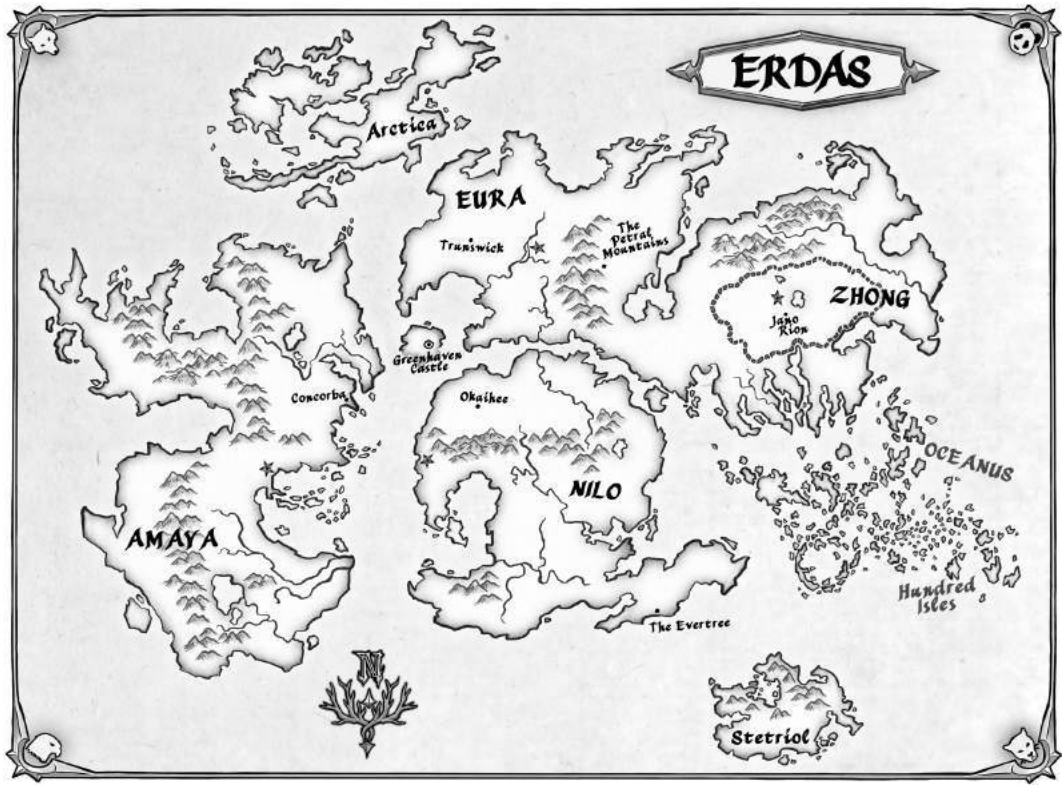


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WARRIOR'S PATH

ABEKE TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND HELD IT FOR AN EXTRA second before slowly exhaling. From the deck of the ship, in the minutes before daybreak, she could already sense a change in the air. It felt familiar. Even though they were still far away from the savannahs where she'd been raised, the breeze carried the scent, the warmth, the feel of her homeland. Nilo was on the horizon and it couldn't come soon enough.

The five Greencloaks—Abeke, Conor, Meilin, Rollan, and Anka—had been aboard the small ship for several days, and they still had a ways to travel before reaching their final destination in southern Nilo. Abeke was beginning to believe that Uraza's aversion to water was rubbing off on her. All she wanted to do was step foot on solid land ... but they had to press on. Their priority was to hopefully find a clue about the bond tokens in the library of Takoda's former monastery.

But that hope carried an unwanted partner ... someone Abeke and the rest of the team despised. Someone who had also returned to the monastery and who might have a few answers for them.

Kovo.

Even the thought of the Great Ape made Abeke's stomach turn. The gorilla had masterminded both the First and Second Devourer Wars, killing thousands, including Meilin's father. That was something that couldn't simply be forgotten, even if the new version of Kovo had recently helped them defeat the Wym.

The rising sun now streaked the sky with pink and purple rays of light, adding to the beauty of the horizon. Soon Abeke would be seeing Kovo, and she'd have to put aside all her feelings about him.

Abeke stared down into the deep blue water.

Was her anger toward Kovo similar to how people felt about the Greencloaks?

No. She shook away the comparison. It was a different situation. The Greencloaks hadn't acted willingly with the Wyrms—they'd been infected by its parasites. And the Greencloaks had been framed for the assassination of the Emperor of Zhong. Kovo, on the other hand, had done all those terrible things himself. He had taken the world to the brink of human extinction.

Twice.

The thought of Kovo and his conniving ways sent a cold shiver down Abeke's back, causing her to shudder. She had to keep her guard up around that Great Beast.

"Couldn't sleep?" Rollan asked, joining Abeke on the deck. "Or just enjoying the sunrise?"

"Neither." Abeke sighed. "Just thinking."

"Yeah, me too." Rollan leaned his back on the rail. "This rickety old ship hasn't been treating us too bad. Then again, it still has another week to go."

Abeke smiled. The Greencloaks had been lucky that Dawson, after hearing about his brother, had insisted on helping them get out of Eura. Thanks to him, they had supplies, weapons, a ship, and a two-man crew of old fishermen, Milo and Keane.

"I was actually thinking about Kovo," Abeke admitted. "Not looking forward to seeing him again."

"Can you imagine how Conor feels? Last time he was in the waters around Takoda's monastery was when he became infected with the Wyrms' parasite. This really can't be easy for him."

"You're right. I hadn't even ..." Abeke sighed again. She'd been so wrapped up in returning to Nilo that she hadn't stopped to think about Conor. "Have you talked to him? Is he okay?"

"He'll be fine," Meilin said, walking toward them from the bow of the ship. "He's a Hero of Erdas. He's a survivor."

"I was thinking ..." Anka suddenly appeared next to them. Her chameleon-like abilities still made Abeke uneasy. Abeke had always

prided herself on her hunting skills, but this diminutive Greencloak seemed to confound her senses. “If the library doesn’t have any information on the bond tokens, will Kovo tell us if he knows anything? I mean, he helped you with the Wyrms, but that was because the whole world was in peril. He’s not a fan of humans ... or Greencloaks.”

“Maybe being bonded to Takoda has changed him,” Rollan said. “Given him a different perspective.” He glanced up at Essix circling above the ship. “Our spirit animals have changed *us*. And I’d like to think we’ve changed them, too.”

Just as Rollan finished, Essix screeched and dove past the port side, buzzing right over the top of Rollan’s head as if in protest. Essix was stubborn and headstrong, but there was no denying she had a soft spot for Rollan. They worked well together, each one fiercely independent yet always loyal.

Meilin snickered. “You’ve really changed her.”

“Very funny, Essix!” Rollan shouted. “Way to support my point.”

Essix flew around the ship one more time before coming to rest at the top of the mast.

“Maybe Essix saw something.” Conor emerged from belowdecks, a concerned look on his face. He stepped closer to the railing and looked out at the horizon. “In fact, I was coming up to tell you that maybe we shouldn’t go to the monastery at all.”

Meilin placed a hand on Conor’s shoulder. “Conor, it might be difficult for you, after what happened with the Wyrms—”

“That’s not it,” he interrupted. Conor took a step back and looked at the rest of the group. “I had a vision. It was brief, not a full one like I’ve had before with the big wave, but I think we have to go somewhere else.”

“Where?” Abeke asked, quietly pleased at the thought of avoiding Kovo. “What did you see?”

“It was an enormous hole, or maybe a deep crater, and it had three land bridges ... one on top of the other.” Conor closed his eyes for a moment. “It also had a waterfall flowing from the top, past the three bridges, and into a pool at the bottom.”

“And a token was there?” Anka inquired. “Like with the Wildcat’s Claw, where it was hidden behind the waterfall?”

Conor shook his head. “I don’t think so, but it’s the first step in finding them. I’m certain of that. And it felt like we weren’t too far

away.”

“Sounds like you’re describing the sinkhole of the Taabara Chasm,” Abeke said. “It’s not too far from here in the northern part of Nilo.”

“Northern Nilo ... I like the sound of that!” Rollan grinned broadly. “Less time being seasick always sounds good to me.”

“Well, at least you’ve been with your spirit animal,” Meilin pointed out. “None of us have had ours during the voyage. It’ll be good to bring them out.”

“Maybe we should split up,” Conor said, just as Essix shrieked and took flight again. “A few of us go to the sinkhole while the rest continue on to see Takoda.” Conor frowned. “Just in case my vision is wrong.”

“I don’t know,” Anka replied. “I think staying together is a better idea.”

“Me too.” Abeke reached over and gave Conor’s forearm a squeeze. They had been through so much together, and she trusted his instincts. “I believe in your visions.... They haven’t been wrong yet.”

“Plus, sticking together might prevent a repeat of what happened with ...” Rollan didn’t finish the sentence. He had almost broken their unspoken rule.

A hush fell over the group. The experience of having lost Worthy in the cave-in was still raw for everyone. It was all they’d discussed during the first days, but then one morning, without anyone saying a word on the matter, they had stopped talking about it. It wasn’t that they weren’t thinking of him; they just had to place their full attention on the task at hand. Their survival depended on it.

From that point forward there was no more wondering if they had done the right thing in leaving, no more worrying whether Worthy had made it out alive, no more fearing that the Wildcat’s Claw had been found by the Oathbound. The focus was on their mission. They had to find the two remaining bond tokens, Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye.

Anka broke the silence. “Abeke, do you know how long it’ll take to get to the Taabara Chasm?”

Abeke shrugged. “Not long, but I’d have to check the map. Hold on.”

Abeke sprinted belowdecks, grabbed the map of Nilo, and hurried back to her friends.

“Look.” She opened it up and pointed to a spot in the ocean near the northern coast of the continent. “We’re somewhere in this area. We can tell Milo and Keane to change course and go toward this river.” She ran

her fingers down the coastline to the mouth of a river, traced its path inland, and stopped at a place close to some mountains. “Once we dock we can make our way across the savannah, past this hilly area, and the Taabara Chasm should be right there. We might even make it there by tonight or tomorrow morning.” She paused for a moment. “Maybe. I think.”

“Then it’s set.” Rollan thrust his finger toward the sea and grinned. “Onward! To Taabara Chasm!”

“Um, yeah ... ” Meilin rolled her eyes at Rollan’s over-the-top rally cry, but she couldn’t help smiling. “How about I simply go tell Milo and Keane that we’ve had a change of plans?”

“Just remember ... ” Conor hesitated, rubbing the faint mark the Wyrn had left on his forehead. “Taabara may only be the beginning, and not the end. I have a feeling that the bond tokens won’t be easy to find.”

“Well, since when have things been easy for us?” Abeke gave Conor a wink. “We like a challenge.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Conor turned to face the coastline, lost in his own thoughts.



The sun was directly overhead when they climbed into the small rowboat. There were no ports in the area, so Milo had anchored the ship in the middle of the river and Keane would now row with them to shore.

“So, how long should we wait for you to return?” Keane asked as they approached the riverbank lined with papyrus reeds.

Abeke bit her lip. She wanted to have access to the ship, but it didn’t seem fair to leave the two old men stuck in the middle of nowhere. “The thing is ... we aren’t sure how long we’ll be away.”

“Well, Dawson paid us for two weeks of travel,” Keane replied. “And we’ve got about a week’s worth of food left, so it’s your call.”

“Could you wait here for a couple of days and then head somewhere back along the coast?” Rollan suggested as the boat drifted closer to the river’s edge.

“Sure.” Keane nodded. “I have a sister in Badir; it’s a small port town not too far away. We could meet up there. I’ll give you two more weeks, as Dawson paid us.... That’s about all I can take of my sister anyway.”

“Badir sounds good.” Meilin threw a backpack filled with supplies over her shoulder as the rowboat hit the first of the papyrus reeds. “We’ll meet you there if we don’t make it back here in time.”

“Good luck!” Keane called out. The five Greencloaks jumped out of the boat and into water that was about two feet deep.

Abeke slogged through the river, pushing aside reeds while her feet sank into the sand and silt with every step she took. Finally the ground became firmer and she climbed up on dry land. Once she was out of the reeds and onto the grass of the savannah, Abeke took a deep breath, relishing the hot sun that beat down on her.

She was home.

And only one thing was missing from the scene.

Abeke pushed aside her cloak and held out her arm. “Join me, Uraza.”

The leopard appeared in a flash of light and raised her head to face the sun. The large cat’s nostrils twitched as she took in the Niloan air and softly let out a contented purr.

“I know.” Abeke stroked Uraza’s arched back as they took in their surroundings. “I did the same thing. It’s good to be home.” The tall golden grass of the savannah rippled with the soft breeze. The rocky hills they’d have to cross loomed not too far in the distance.

Uraza stretched her legs. Abeke knew what the leopard wanted. “Go,” she whispered.

Uraza immediately jumped through the tall grass, then raced across the savannah toward the hills at full speed. Abeke knew the joy Uraza felt at being free. How fun it would be to race along with her, to hunt for their next meal and savor the midday sun that was baking her shoulders. But now was not the time. They had a mission.

“Uraza’s as happy as I am not to be on that ship anymore,” Rollan observed. The tall grass moved with the leopard, rustling as she sprinted back and forth. “Aren’t you bringing out Briggan, Conor?”

Conor wiped the back of his neck and looked up at the cloudless blue sky. “Think I’ll wait until the day isn’t quite so hot.”

“This is Nilo,” Abeke warned. “If it’s daytime, it’s going to be hot.”

Essix circled the group, screeched to establish her presence in the sky, then flew away once more.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re moving,” Rollan responded to the falcon’s cry. He adjusted his green cloak, backpack, and canteen. “Everyone have

their stuff?” Rollan asked.

“Since when are you the responsible one?” Meilin teased.

Rollan smiled. “Since I realized that I’d have to share my water if someone forgot theirs.”

“Really?” Conor could barely hide his smile. “You mean to say you wouldn’t share with Meilin?”

Abeke heard Anka giggle, even though she could no longer be seen.

They were all aware of the feelings between Rollan and Meilin, but no one usually said anything. It was only confirmed by the occasional reddening of Meilin’s cheeks and Rollan’s quick interest in changing the topic of conversation.

“We’re wasting time.... Let’s go.” Meilin marched ahead, leaving the group behind before Abeke could check to see if her face had turned pink once again.

As the team trekked toward the Taabara Chasm, a few puffy white clouds began to gather, providing occasional relief from the heat. The terrain also changed from the grasses of the savannah to rocky hills dotted with trees. In the distance, what had at first looked like hills quietly morphed into amber-colored mountains, with scattered patches of green.

Stopping for a quick break under the shade of a wide-branched cypress tree, Conor released Briggan. The wolf burst onto the scene and, with his tail wagging, pounced on Conor, knocking him to the ground.

“Whoa,” Conor laughed as Briggan placed his two front paws on Conor’s chest and raised his snout to sniff the air. Conor ran his hand through the Great Wolf’s gray-white fur while the wolf’s cobalt-blue eyes analyzed everything. “Sense anything?”

Briggan glanced down at Conor before giving him a quick lick on his forehead. The wolf jumped off to further inspect their surroundings.

“Ha, I would take that as an all clear,” Anka said, her body blending with the tree trunk she was leaning against.

Abeke opened up the map and checked their location. From the look of things, it seemed like the sinkhole that formed the Taabara Chasm should be close by.

“Are we headed in the right direction?” Meilin asked.

“Think so,” Abeke answered, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. She scanned the land for a small stream that might feed into the waterfall of the chasm.

Briggan let out a long howl from somewhere in the distance.

Rollan stretched out his hand to help Conor up. “Sounds like your partner may have found something of interest.”

Conor grinned. “Leave it to Briggan to be here five minutes and already track something down.”

As they all headed toward the sound of Briggan’s howl, Rollan shook his canteen. “I really hope he’s found some fresh water, because I’m almost out.”

Abeke shook her head. “Hm, who was talking about having enough supplies so we wouldn’t have to share water later? Oh yeah, that was you.”

“Hey ... ” Rollan shrugged, a mischievous smile on his face. “These muscles need the extra hydration.”

At that remark, everyone laughed out loud.

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” Rollan mumbled.

Soon, the group came upon a small stream where Briggan and Uraza had both decided to lounge by its edge.

“Look at those two.” Meilin pointed. “They’re like—”

“Shhh.” Abeke touched her ear. “Listen.”

Besides the gurgling sound of the water bouncing off of several rocks in the stream, there was a louder, crashing sound of rushing water cascading down somewhere.

“The waterfall has to be nearby,” Abeke said as Rollan filled his canteen with water. “It’s got to be downstream.”

Abeke and the group followed the stream until the ground dropped, disappearing into a giant sinkhole. From where they stood, at the very edge of the deep crater, they could see the stream cascade down past three land bridges, each of which seemed to bisect the hole at different depths.

“Now what?” Rollan asked, looking down. “Do we go down into that giant rabbit hole, cross one of the bridges, or stay up here?”

“In my vision, I could see the gorge’s opening high overhead. The water seemed to be falling from above.” Conor patted Briggan, who had now rejoined them. The wolf nuzzled his hand. “So, I think we have to go to the bottom.”

“Yeah,” Rollan sighed. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Abeke looked at the western sky, where the sun was already hanging low. They had made good time, but it would be much darker in the

gorge. Any remaining light would soon disappear. She could already hear a nightingale chirping in the distance. If they were going to go, they needed to be quick about it.

“What do you think, Uraza?” Abeke asked the leopard, who was peering over the edge right next to her. “Should we head down and see if there’s anything there? Or wait until morning?”

Uraza responded by leaping off the rocky ledge onto the path toward the bottom.

“Guess that’s your answer,” Meilin said, following Uraza with a jump of her own. She looked back up at the rest of the group. “Come on!”

Once at the bottom of the crater, Meilin released Jhi. The Great Panda lumbered over to Meilin, and their foreheads touched. The genuine affection between the two was obvious to Abeke. Then Jhi waddled over to where Briggan and Uraza were lapping up water from the edge of the small pond. The entire team spread out, hunting for a clue as to why Conor’s vision had brought them here.

Abeke first searched behind the waterfall, hoping that there might be a cave like in Eura, but there was nothing there.

“Maybe it’s like the Heart of the Land.” Rollan touched the token that hung under his shirt. “Hidden within a rock somewhere.”

“There are a million rocks here, though,” Anka said.

“How about hidden along a path?” Conor pointed to a narrow chasm through the mountain walls.

Abeke walked over to him. “Are you saying we should go through there?” The opening would require them to enter single file. If it got much narrower, their spirit animals would certainly not fit. As it was, Jhi already couldn’t enter.

“See how the ground is worn down in spots?” Conor pointed to the rock floor. “I think this is a path that’s been used before. Used a lot.”

Meilin and Rollan joined them, each peering into the long, narrow chasm.

“We should explore in there before it gets much darker,” Meilin said. “Don’t you think, Rollan?”

Rollan didn’t answer. He only stared into it.

“Rollan?” Conor repeated his name.

Meilin placed a hand on Rollan’s shoulder. “You’re thinking of Tarik, aren’t you?” she said. “The last battle you fought with him.”

“It looked a lot like this place,” he muttered. “Same type of chasm. A warrior’s last path.”

“But it’s not that place, and we aren’t battling the Devourer or the Conquerors,” Meilin replied in a gentle voice.

Suddenly a sense of unease filled Abeke. This *would* be a good place for an ambush. She glanced around, her hunter instincts on full alert.

It was too quiet.

Even the nightingale had stopped singing. Something was off.

“I think we should get out of here,” Abeke said in a hushed voice. “Maybe have Essix see if—”

Before Abeke could finish her sentence, a hooded figure jumped down and twirled a quarterstaff in front of them.

“Now!” came a shout from above, and suddenly warriors wearing gray cloaks rained down all around them.

First, one dropped behind Abeke. Then another in front. Then two more blocked the path forward through the chasm.

Abeke pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it to her bow, just as Meilin drew out her sword.

In a split second, more than two dozen cloaked figures had jumped down from the cliffs ... all pointing their weapons at the five Greencloaks or at their spirit animals over by the pond. High above all of them, balanced on the natural bridge, another dozen attackers stood with arrows trained on Abeke and her friends.

There was no escape.... They were trapped!



GIANT HAIRBALL

FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE WAS NEVER ROLLAN'S FIRST choice. He had learned on the streets of Concorba that diplomacy could work wonders. Words often yielded better results than any sword. Disarm them with a smile whenever possible.

Rollan quickly assessed the situation. Jhi, Briggan, and Uraza were surrounded, but they would be able to take care of themselves. The four Greencloaks had taken defensive stances against the hooded warriors, but Rollan wasn't sure where Anka had gone. She'd camouflaged herself so well that he couldn't see her at all. What Rollan *could* see was that these people weren't dressed in all black like the Oathbound.

Perhaps he could convince them that they weren't enemies.

"Friends, friends." Rollan lowered his dagger and took a step toward one of the figures. "We mean you no harm." He acted calm, as if the Greencloaks had the upper hand, instead of the other way around.

"Rollan ... " Meilin's voice carried a warning that this approach might not be the best idea.

Rollan ignored her. She was a warrior at heart. Her instinct was always to fight. But he had to use his gut. He took another step. "We aren't here for a battle. We're only in search of something. Perhaps you could help."

The response came swiftly. The hooded figure in front of him spun his quarterstaff in the air, then swung it low at Rollan's knees, trying to knock his legs out from under him.

Rollan jumped over the end and quickly grabbed the pole, yanking it out of the hooded figure's hand and turning it on him.

So much for diplomacy.

"STOP!" a voice called from above. Another hooded warrior appeared from an opening near one of the land bridges. The figure ran along a path to the bottom, leaping down the last few feet to skid to a halt right in front of Rollan. "Don't harm these people. These *are* our friends."

Rollan couldn't believe it.... His plan had worked.

The cloaked figure pulled back his gray hood.

"TAKODA!" Meilin exclaimed.

Takoda smiled and rushed over to be embraced by Meilin, Abeke, Conor, and Rollan. "I'm so glad that you're all safe!" he exclaimed, but then lowered his voice to a whisper. "I heard what happened with the Emperor of Zhong. How could the Greencloaks do something like that? What's going on?"

"It was a setup by people impersonating us," Meilin answered. "We're trying to make things right again."

Takoda didn't hesitate. "How can I help?" he asked. "Do you want me to go with you somewhere? Maybe give you a place to hide with the monks?"

Rollan stared at Takoda. The boy had grown about four inches since he'd last seen him. He'd also become more muscular.

But along with Takoda came Kovo, who was bonded to the young monk. Rollan didn't love the idea of traveling with the once subjugator of Erdas. "Have you heard of something called Stormspeaker ... or the Dragon's Eye?"

Takoda shook his head. "What are they?"

"Important items we need in order to clear our names and unite Erdas," Conor explained. "We believe at least one of them is found in Nilo."

Murmuring had risen from the cloaked figures. The monks still had their weapons trained on the group and their spirit animals.

"Takoda, what's going on?" someone shouted.

Takoda turned around. "Everyone, please ... lower your weapons." He pushed down the spear of one of the nearby monks. "These are my friends, the ones I've told you about. The ones who helped defeat the

Wyrms. The Heroes of Erdas. We should be welcoming them, not threatening them.”

Briggan growled at one of the hooded monks and Rollan could see Uraza’s muscles tense and tauten. Even Jhi was staring down the person in front of her.

“Place your spirit animals in passive state,” Takoda whispered. “The monks won’t relax if they’re out.”

Meilin, Abeke, and Conor glanced at each other. They each quietly nodded and called back their animals.

Rollan could see the hesitation among the monks, but they slowly put away their weapons and pulled back their hoods in an apparent symbol of acceptance.

Takoda had risen to become a leader in his community. This was definitely not the same boy Rollan had first encountered moping in Greenhaven. The battles underground against the Wyrms had clearly changed him ... or was it Kovo’s influence? Had the bond between him and the Great Beast caused him to grow in his command of others? Was it just a sign of growing up? Rollan wasn’t sure. Perhaps Kovo had changed, too. Doubtful, but anything was possible.

“Do you know someone who might help us?” Meilin asked.

Rollan feared that the answer would be Kovo, but Takoda surprised them. “I don’t know *someone* with answers, but I know *someplace* that might have them. Come with me.” Takoda motioned for the group to follow him into the chasm.

“No!” The monk who had attacked Rollan leaped forward, blocking the entrance. “You can’t take them into Maktaba. You’d be placing everyone and everything at risk.”

“Step aside, Sodu.” Takoda stared him down. “I think I’ve earned the right to bring four guests—four *friends*—into our community.”

Sodu didn’t back off. “They’re wanted by the Oathbound! I’ve heard the rumors of what happens to those who help Greencloaks. We can’t allow them entrance. The library has never been seized, because strangers are not permitted inside.”

“These four aren’t strangers,” Takoda argued. “They’re known to everyone.”

“Ahem.” Anka cleared her throat. She took two steps forward, away from the mountain wall where she had been camouflaging herself, and allowed herself to be seen. “There’s five of us, actually.”

Takoda spun around. He hadn't noticed her, even though she'd been standing so close to him.

"Anka's with us," Meilin quickly explained. "Her spirit animal is a chameleon. We can vouch for her, though."

"You see!" Sodu mocked Takoda. "You can't even recognize danger when it's right next to you." He turned to the monks as Anka blended back into the colors of the mountain. "My brothers, we cannot let them enter. There's no telling what will happen if they do. We would be putting everything at risk."

"What I see"—Takoda spoke to Sodu through clenched teeth—"is someone who pretends to be strong, but is afraid of his own shadow."

"Look who's talking!" Sodu exclaimed. "The boy who couldn't be trusted to travel alone, but who required the guidance of a superior student to accompany him to Maktaba."

Takoda's eyes narrowed. "And when none could be found, they told me to bring you."

"Ha! Nice try, but we all know the truth," Sodu scoffed. "You are still only a boy."

"We'll see about that." Takoda sneered and took a few steps forward. He lifted his arms and addressed the other monks in a loud, booming voice. "Brothers and sisters, you all know me and trust my judgment. These are my friends, the ones who defeated the Devourer and then helped destroy the Wurm. They are the Heroes of Erdas, who have selflessly risked everything for Nilo ... for the entire world. They come to us seeking answers and rest ... something only we can offer. Isn't it our duty to share our knowledge with the righteous and stand against the Oathbound? Will you not rise up, stiffen your resolve, and aid them?"

There were whispers among the monks. A sense of purpose was filling the cavern.

"We are being called to be *part* of history," Takoda continued, "instead of just preserving the historical accounts. We cannot turn our backs on those who defended us. We have a duty, so I ask you ... " He paused for a moment, capturing everyone's attention. "Who will join me in leading these heroes to find the answers they seek? Who stands with me and with the Heroes of Erdas?"

"I do!" shouted one monk.

"As do I!" yelled another.

“I DO!” hollered the remaining monks in unison. All except Sodu, who stayed silent with his arms crossed.

“To the Heroes of Erdas!” Takoda shouted, raising a fist in the air.

“THE HEROES OF ERDAS!” the monks roared back.

“Glad he’s on our side,” Rollan whispered to Conor as he followed Takoda into the chasm.

As the Greencloaks walked through the narrow passage, it continued closing in on either side. Soon it was impossibly tight, like a fissure running up the mountain. As night fell and the light waned, Takoda lit a small lantern. Rollan glanced up the steep rock walls at the sliver of dark sky above them. He knew Essix was flying above them somewhere, giving them protection from the air.

“So what’s the deal with your friend Sodu?” Rollan asked Takoda. “Not the friendliest monk I’ve seen ... not that I’ve actually seen any before today. Except for you, of course.”

“Yeah, we have some history,” Takoda explained. “We were together at the other monastery before I bonded with Kovo. After everything that happened with the Wyrms, we were both sent here. He’s not my biggest fan.”

Rollan chuckled at the understatement. “You think?”

“Almost there!” Takoda called back to the others as the path opened up to a ledge high up on a mountain.

“Finally. I was wondering when we’d get ... whoa!” Rollan waved his arms, trying to maintain his balance as Takoda yanked him back. In the darkness, he had misjudged where the ledge ended and almost stepped off.

“We’re about two hundred feet up and it’s a straight drop,” Takoda warned.

“A little more notice next time,” Rollan muttered over the pounding of his heart.

“Wow,” Conor said as he stepped onto the ledge. “I didn’t even realize the incline was taking us so high.”

“The monastery is up there.” Takoda pointed to a few twinkling lights in the distance. The moonlight revealed enough of the monastery that Rollan could tell it had been built into the mountainside, about two-thirds of the way to the top.

“Guess we have to take one of these rope ladders the rest of the way up?” Rollan tugged on a pair of old ropes with wooden rungs fastened

between them. None of it looked very sturdy. “It’s about another two hundred feet?”

“Two fifty,” Takoda corrected.

“This could explain why you don’t get many visitors,” Meilin added. “Though it does remind me of parts of Zhong.” She grabbed the first ladder’s wooden rung and hoisted herself up.

“Before we all get there, I, um ... ” Takoda suddenly seemed unsure of himself.

“Spit it out,” Meilin said.

“Yeah, so, I was going to ask that you not bring out Uraza, Briggan, or Jhi when we get up there. Maktaba is, well, a sort of *particular* place, if you haven’t noticed. Not that I don’t want them around, but I’m not sure what the reaction would be.”

“From who?” Abeke asked. “The monks or Kovo?”

Takoda sighed. “Both, I guess.”

They all knew there was no love lost between their spirit animals. Kovo had killed the Four Great Beasts during the First Devourer War and had in turn been killed by them during the second. They had reluctantly worked together to defeat a common enemy, but no one truly knew what would happen if they were thrust together again. Still, Rollan didn’t like the idea of having to accommodate *Kovo*.

“I think Kovo will just have to figure it out,” Abeke said in a cool, unforgiving voice. “We’ve all had to deal with him.”

“But we’re guests,” Conor reasoned. “Let’s not stir up any trouble.”

“Kovo is different now,” Takoda said as they each began climbing the ladders. “You’ll see.”

Rollan was about to make a joke when he glanced down at the steep drop to the bottom and felt his head spin. Devastating quips would have to wait, since he needed all his concentration to not fall. As they continued up the mountain, the glow of the moon rising over the adjacent mountain peak cast a dim light over their surroundings. It was nighttime, but Rollan wasn’t looking anywhere except at the rung right above him. It seemed as if everyone was focused on the climb, because no one spoke. In fact, all Rollan could hear were the occasional grunts and sighs as someone paused to catch their breath before pressing on.

Once they arrived at the monastery, Rollan turned to look back at the view. An enormous sense of peace washed over him. It was a combination of the beauty of the thousand stars above him and the moon

rising silently in the sky. Wind whispered past the oil lanterns lighting the entrance to Maktaba. For the first time in weeks he felt safe, a security provided by the remote location.

“Nice, huh?” Takoda smiled, taking it all in as if for the first time. “Just be careful with the thorns that line the bushes near the entrance.” He waited for the remaining Greencloaks and then motioned for them all to follow him. “Come on, I think someone may want to see you.”

“I doubt it,” Abeke muttered as she walked past Rollan.

Rollan nodded in agreement. Kovo couldn’t have changed that much.

The group passed several monks in the wide corridors who silently stared as they walked by... It seemed that word of their arrival was spreading throughout the monastery.

“This is the Great Hall,” Takoda said, entering a large room where oil lamps hung from the many rafters that crisscrossed the vaulted ceiling. There were a few monks eating at one of the long dining tables on the right side of the room, and a fire burned in the massive fireplace on the opposite end. “Figured you might want to stop and get something to eat before—”

“MEILIN! CONOR!” someone shouted while running down a darkened staircase in the corner. “ROLLAN! ABEKE!”

Takoda smiled. “Told you someone would want to see you.”

A girl with white hair and almost translucent skin rushed into the light.

It was Xanthe, the Sadrean warrior Meilin and Conor had met while battling the Wyrms underground. “I can’t believe you’re all here!” She hurried over and pulled Meilin close to her. “Takoda and I heard about what happened to your surface elder—er, emperor. How could—”

“It wasn’t us,” Meilin explained. “They were imposters.”

Xanthe tapped Takoda in the chest with the back of her hand. “What did I tell you? I knew it couldn’t be real Greencloaks.”

“And since when are you a monk, Xanthe?” Conor teased. “Or are you here for another reason?”

Takoda blushed at the insinuation, but Xanthe simply rolled her eyes. “I’m here to give a record of my people’s history. Preserve the Sadrean stories for future generations.”

“How are things in Sadre now?” Meilin asked.

“Still recovering. Phos Astos will never be the same, but it’s being rebuilt ... slowly.”

“Sounds like several places we’ve seen,” Anka said.

Xanthe scanned the room. “Who said that?”

“Oh.” Meilin spun around. “That’s Anka. I forgot to introduce the two of you. Anka, Anka, where are you?”

“Right here.” Anka stepped away from a purple curtain in a dark corner of the room, her skin and clothing changing from purple to their natural coloring. “Don’t mind me. Nobody does. Pleasure to meet you, Xanthe.”

“Uh, yes, nice to meet you, too,” Xanthe replied as Anka moved into the shadows and blended back into her surroundings.

That was when the group noticed him: a large looming figure who sat in the darkest corner of the space, draped in shadow and staring out the window. His massive back was turned to the group, but there was no mistaking him.

Kovo.

“Guess we don’t merit even a glance from him,” Abeke speculated.

“That’s not it,” Takoda explained. “Ever since we stopped the Wurm, Kovo’s gone almost completely silent. He rarely communicates with me, and he refuses to go into passive form.”

Rollan cautiously drew closer to the Great Ape. “Is something wrong? Did someone take his banana away?”

Takoda shook his head. “It’s part of his healing journey. Being here has given him the peace to deal with the things he’s done in the past. He wants, no, he needs time for himself.”

“Hmpf.” Meilin didn’t seem to be buying it.

“So he won’t be able to give us information on Stormspeaker or the Dragon’s Eye?” Conor asked.

“Afraid not,” Takoda said. “He won’t react to anyone.” He looked to one of the corridors, where some of the monks were carrying trays of food. “I’ll get you some dinner. Sit and rest for a moment.”

Xanthe escorted them to one of the tables. “So those things you mentioned ... what are they?”

“Important gifts we have to find for the Greencloaks,” Abeke said, being purposefully vague.

“It’s too bad Kovo can’t help,” Xanthe said.

“We’ll see about that.” Rollan got up from the table and walked over to Kovo. He stood directly in front of the gorilla, looking up at him.

“Rollan ... ” Meilin didn’t sound pleased. “What are you doing?”

“I want to see if he’s really as unaware as he’d have us believe.” Rollan clapped his hands loudly in front of Kovo’s red eyes, but the giant gorilla didn’t even blink.

“Rollan!” Abeke raced over and pulled Rollan away just as he began waving his hands in front of Kovo’s face.

“Are you crazy?” Abeke shook her head in disbelief. “Kovo could toss you out that window!”

“We need answers, right?” Rollan broke away from Abeke’s grip and returned to stand in front of Kovo. “Listen, you giant hairball, we need to find Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye. If you’re as smart as you pretend to be, prove it by telling us where they are.”

Silence.

Rollan stood on his toes to get eye-to-eye with Kovo. “You really are one ugly, selfish—”

“Rollan!” Takoda had returned, carrying a tray with several plates of food.

Rollan continued. “Foul-smelling, mangy, good-for-nothing waste of —”

Takoda slammed the tray down on the table and began marching toward Rollan.

“An unwise move, brave Amayan warrior,” an unfamiliar voice called out from the hall’s entryway, stopping Takoda in his tracks. “Best not to taunt someone who can later exact revenge. Kovo can hear you; he only chooses not to react ... yet.”

Rollan’s mouth twitched and he swallowed the lump that had formed in the back of his throat. He peered around Kovo’s massive chest and saw an old man, his back bent down with the weight of the years, leaning on a gnarled, wooden cane for support. “Yes, well, I was only trying to provoke a reaction, so he’d snap out of it and help us.”

“Reacting out of anger or fear is rarely a good decision. A lesson for Kovo ... and perhaps for you.”

Rollan was about to respond when Takoda interjected.

“Everyone, I want to introduce you to the Honorable Naveb of Maktaba.” He paused as the old man gave the group a slight nod. “He’s one of our esteemed elders and our greatest librarian. He knows where to find all sorts of secrets.”

Meilin bowed in acknowledgment of the elder. “Sir, we’re looking for information about—”

“Yes, yes.” The old man raised a hand. “I may be old, but I could still hear the instigator over there while he was tormenting Kovo.”

“That’s not exactly what—” Rollan stopped speaking as Abeke gave him a gentle nudge. Silence was a virtue that often escaped Rollan.

“I see you’re from this land.” Naveb motioned to Abeke. “I hope you are brighter than your friend there.”

“Sir,” Abeke responded with respect, “we each have our unique strengths, which—”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Naveb turned around. “Well, come on. Grab your food and let’s go. I’m not getting any younger.” He headed down a dimly lit hallway. “We have work to do ... if you can pass the test.”



NEFRINI'S CROWN

MEILIN EYED THE OLD MONK. HE WAS BALD, WITH A short white beard that stood out against his dark skin. His cane tapped the stone floors with a deliberate, rhythmic pattern as he led the group down the maze of corridors. At first glance, the old man appeared frail and unsteady, but to Meilin there was something in the way he had held her gaze that made her think he was much more.... She just didn't know what.

“Where are we going?” Meilin whispered to Xanthe.

“One of the libraries, I think,” she answered. “There are several of them here.”

They entered a large circular room filled with thousands of books, piled all the way to the rafters. Meilin could only marvel at the size of the place. She'd seen many libraries in her lifetime, but this one room rivaled the largest of them.

Naveb waited for them in the center of the room. He stood motionless, his eyes closed and both of his hands resting on his cane.

One minute passed, then another.

Meilin glanced at Takoda, hoping he'd reveal a clue about what was happening. He merely shrugged. The silence had become uncomfortable. They were wasting time ... time that could be spent looking for the bond tokens. Was this part of the test he'd mentioned? Meilin considered bringing Jhi out of passive state so she could give Meilin the serenity to see things clearly, perhaps pick up on some cues they were overlooking.

“Um, Master Naveb, are we waiting for something?” Conor asked.

Naveb did not answer, but instead approached Conor. He stared at the faint mark of the Wyrms on his forehead, then narrowed his eyes in recognition of the symbol. "Ah, so you are the one. The Greencloak who took Takoda from the monastery. The one who succumbed to the Wyrms in Sadre, and eventually turned on him and all his allies."

"Yes, but what happened there ... I didn't have a choice," Conor explained hastily.

"There's always a choice," Naveb responded sharply. "And you made yours."

"No, no. You don't understand. I had no control." Conor rubbed the mark, as if he could wipe away its stain.

Meilin's blood began to boil. She could not allow this man to insult Conor for being infected by the Wyrms, even if he was an elder. She knew how hard Conor had battled against it, what he had sacrificed, and how some of his actions while under the Wyrms' influence still tore at his heart. It wasn't fair to him and it wasn't fair to what they'd all endured.

"Regardless of what you say, you are not like the others. Not even the instigator." Naveb pointed to the door. "You will have to leave before we can continue."

"Excuse me, sir ... " Meilin summoned up every lesson in self-control that she'd learned while growing up in the palaces of Zhong. "But you have no right to say that to Conor. I don't know what Xanthe or Takoda told you, but Conor is no less than a hero." Meilin glanced over at Conor. "He is, and always will be, one of us. If he goes, we all go."

"And do you all feel the same way?" Naveb looked toward Rollan and Abeke.

"Absolutely," Rollan said, walking to stand next to Conor. "We can always find answers somewhere else."

Abeke took Conor's hand, linking her fingers with his, and lifted their intertwined hands. "We're a team. Now and forever."

"I see." Naveb took a step back. "But you won't find answers anywhere else." He was barely able to hide a smirk beneath his beard. "You will stay and find your answers here, because you have passed my test." He walked over to a black ladder with wheels on the bottom. "It is said that those who pursue the bond tokens must be united in mind and spirit. I would never help a fractured group seeking such powerful items." He rolled the ladder along a metal railing that ran around the

room. “Despite being young, you have endured much, and yet you’re still united. That is why I will help.”

Meilin’s mouth dropped open. “So you only said those things to see if you could split us up? You didn’t really mean it.”

“No, I meant what I said. I always do.” He stopped and climbed the first two steps. “That boy is an instigator, and the other one’s choices have set him apart from his friends.”

They were back to where they’d started ... being disrespected.

“Most Honored Naveb,” Takoda began, “these are the Heroes of—”

“Here it is!” Naveb pulled out a book from the shelf. He turned to look down at Takoda’s concerned face. “My dear boy, I am not insulting your friends. I am merely speaking the truth.” He took a cautious step down, then another. “Is the one from Amaya not an instigator? Every group needs someone to get things moving, and to lighten the mood when our burdens become too heavy.”

Naveb took his cane in one hand and tucked the book beneath his other arm. “And the Euran boy, was it not his choice to stand and fight on behalf of Kovo—his once enemy—at great risk to himself? His actions have shown him to be kind and selfless. He is forgiving of others’ mistakes ... but he has yet to extend that forgiveness to himself.”

The old monk hobbled over to a small desk, set down the book, and looked at Meilin. “Am I not right about your friends?”

Meilin didn’t say anything, but he did have a point about Rollan and Conor.

“You know I am, warrior girl.” Naveb struck a match and lit an oil lamp on the desk. He opened the book, then looked back at Meilin and chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Meilin asked.

“You,” Naveb replied. Then he returned to the book, flipping through the first few pages. “A fighter who must battle herself to achieve what she truly wants.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Meilin scoffed, but she caught Rollan and Abeke exchanging a smirk.

Naveb shook his head and sighed. “I was once like you. Pretending to be tough in spirit. You will learn.” He pointed to a page in the book. “Now, Niloan girl, come and look at this. It tells of Stormspeaker.”

Abeke rushed forward and Meilin followed, peering over her shoulder at the book. In the middle of one of the pages was a drawing of

a slender, dark-skinned woman with a tall, elegant bird standing by her side.

“Isn’t that Nefrini, the High Chieftess of Nilo, with her spirit animal, Nazir?” Abeke asked.

The old monk nodded. “I see you know your Niloan history, but here is something you won’t find in any other book or library.” He turned the page to a listing of property owned by Nefrini. At the very top was the word *Stormspeaker*.

“Whoa,” Abeke muttered. “Stormspeaker was hers and Nazir’s.”

“What does it say about the bond token?” Conor asked.

“It describes Stormspeaker as being made of gold, with a brilliant green stone in its center,” Meilin said.

Abeke ran her finger down the page, looking for another clue. “But not what it is or where to find it.”

“As you are a hunter, I thought you’d be more observant,” Naveb chided. “Your prey is not always in front of you, but sometimes behind you.”

Abeke glanced at Conor standing in the back, then realized what Naveb meant. “The earlier page. The one with the drawing.”

“Perhaps there is hope for you yet,” Naveb said, flipping back to the image of Nefrini.

“Stormspeaker is her crown!” Abeke exclaimed.

Anka appeared next to Abeke, squeezing past Conor, Rollan, and Meilin. “You’re right. It’s made of gold and the front has a bird grasping a green stone in its beak.”

“Not just any bird,” Naveb corrected, unfazed by Anka’s sudden appearance.

“A hammerkop, also known as a lightning bird.” Abeke smiled. “Like Nazir.”

“But where do we find this crown?” Rollan asked.

“Ah ... for that we will have to look in one of our other books.” Naveb scanned the room. “I believe the only reference we have is in a journal left behind by a Greencloak who visited long ago.” He stroked his beard. “Now, where would that book be?” He hobbled over to one of the shelves and began running his hand over the spines of several books.

“Did you meet this Greencloak?” Abeke asked.

“Oh, no.” Naveb kept searching. “He visited before I was even born.”

“Then it’s *really* ancient history,” Rollan said with a smirk.

Naveb either didn’t hear him or chose to ignore the comment. “Here it is,” he said, pulling out a thin, leather-covered journal with the name *Tembo* engraved in gold letters on the front, and passed it to Takoda.

“Stop!” Sodu burst in and yanked the book from Takoda’s hands. “Master Naveb, you cannot trust these killers. They should never have been allowed entry. Anything they discover might be traced to us. We could be judged as conspirators. Don’t you understand? We’ll be labeled traitors!”

“Sodu,” Master Naveb sighed. “I understand things completely.”

Takoda lunged for the book just as Sodu spun around the desk, keeping out of reach.

“Give it back,” Meilin demanded, stalking Sodu around the desk, while Conor slowly approached from behind. She was waiting for the right moment to attack. “If you know what’s good for you.”

Sodu met Meilin’s gaze, then a slight smile crept across his face. “Guess this book is pretty important, huh?”

Before Meilin could react, Sodu grabbed the oil lamp and smashed the glass on the corner of the desk.

“What are you doing?” Abeke yelled.

Sodu’s eyes narrowed as he held the thin book over the open flame, the bottoms of the pages curling with the heat. “Leave now,” he snarled, “or this book burns.”



LETTERS

CONOR AND THE OTHER GREENCLOAKS BACKED AWAY from Sodu, raising their hands in surrender, knowing that the book he held over the flame might be their only lead to finding Stormspeaker. In return, Sodu's lips tipped up to form a victorious sneer. But his delight in having the upper hand lasted only for a moment.

Whack!

Sodu's eyes bulged as all the air left his lungs.

Master Naveb's cane had come flying across Sodu's back with resounding speed. Before anyone could react, Master Naveb spun his cane and slapped the book high into the air. He then twisted into a roundhouse kick, striking Sodu in the chest. As Sodu tumbled to his knees, Master Naveb slid across the room and caught the book before it could hit the floor. Slowly, he pulled himself up with his cane and dusted off the cover of the journal.

"Hold on to it a little tighter this time," he said, handing the book back to Takoda.

Conor couldn't believe what he had just witnessed. The old monk was an incredible fighter. He was equal parts grace, strength, instinct, and speed. They could all learn so much from him.

"Master Naveb ... " Sodu staggered up.

"Leave this library," Master Naveb ordered. "We will discuss your punishment later."

Sodu kept his gaze on the floor. “I truly meant no harm or disrespect.”

“Yet you committed both,” Naveb said dryly. “Your lack of trust in my decision confirms what I told Ananda when she sent you here with Takoda. I cannot teach someone who only sees with eyes of fear.”

Sodu lifted his head. “No, Master.” His voice had an edge to it. “I fear only *one* thing. I fear what your recklessness will bring down upon this place.” He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library before anything else could be said.

No one moved. Sodu had left, but traces of the turmoil he’d brought seemed to linger.

Rollan broke the silence. “I think he may now have a fear of canes, too,” he said with a grin.

Master Naveb shot Rollan a stern look and the boy’s grin disappeared.

“Master Naveb, those moves ...” Meilin said with barely restrained awe. “It was as if you were flying.”

This comment seemed to please the old monk. His face softened and his shoulders relaxed. “Yes, well, once a warrior, always a warrior.” He pointed to Takoda. “Go ahead and open the Greencloak’s journal. If there’s any information about where to find Stormspeaker, it’ll be there.”

Takoda gently placed the book on the desk and opened it. He glanced sheepishly at Conor. “You should probably do this and not me,” he said, stepping aside. “I’m no Greencloak.”

Conor hesitated. “You might not be wearing the cloak, but you’re just as much a hero as any of us. We owe you a lot, Takoda. And we wouldn’t even *have* the book if you hadn’t gotten us in here.” He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Go on, you should be the one to read it.”

Takoda shook his head. “But you are—”

“Oh, for the love of—” Meilin gently pushed Conor and Takoda aside. “Why don’t I just read it?”

“Well, *someone* should read the book, considering everything that just happened.” Master Naveb hobbled toward the door. “Speaking of which, I should go see about that foolish Sodu. He’s had enough time to contemplate his actions.”

“Thank you for pointing us in the right direction, Master Naveb,” Conor said as he accompanied the old monk to the door.

“Yes, thank you!” Rollan shouted in agreement.

“Meh!” Master Naveb waved them both off without turning around. “Such noise! A library is supposed to be a place of quiet contemplation,” he complained, but as he turned the corner, Conor caught the slightest smile on the old monk’s face.

“Come here, Conor,” Abeke urged as they all gathered around the desk where Meilin was hunched over the journal, her face close to the pages.

“The lettering is faded in some parts,” Meilin muttered. “And he writes in this ornate calligraphy-like style.”

She scanned the first pages. “This beginning part is all about Tembo’s travels ... where he eats and sleeps.” She read a little further into the journal. “Oh, and here he is talking about some earlier battles and the formation of the Greencloaks.” She gasped. “He was there when Briggan and the other Four Fallen united the Greencloaks against the first Devourer! And he claims that he once rode on Uraza’s back?”

“That ... doesn’t sound like Uraza,” Rollan said doubtfully.

“What does it say about Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye?” Anka asked from an unseen location, the shadows of the library giving her even more camouflage than usual.

“Nothing yet ... ” Meilin continued reading. “But I’m beginning to think we’ve been walking in this Tembo’s footsteps all along. According to his journal, he’s the mysterious Greencloak who hid the Wildcat’s Claw in Wilcoskov. And it says here that ... ” Meilin looked up, her eyes wide. “He was the one who started the tradition of Greencloak leaders passing down the Heart of the Land. *Tembo* was the first leader of the Greencloaks.” She glanced down again, her finger stopping halfway on the page. “Oh, here’s something even more interesting ... ”

“What?” Xanthe leaned over the desk from the opposite side.

“He’s describing his approach to the monastery. Climbing a rope ladder and being greeted by several monks. They welcomed him and gave him a place to stay.” Meilin turned the page. “It says that the monks grew suspicious of him when they discovered that he was carrying two dangerous and powerful items.”

“That was probably them!” Rollan interjected.

Meilin paused and raised a single eyebrow. “Are you going to let me finish?”

Rollan gave her a quick bow in mock deference. “By all means, my lady. Continue.”

Meilin took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Yes, it says that the two objects were the crown of Nefrini, known as Stormspeaker, and an orb called the Dragon’s Eye. That night a group of monks confronted Tembo. There was some type of argument. The monks tried to convince Tembo to give up the objects.” Meilin flipped the page. “This can’t be,” she muttered, turning back to the prior page.

“What’s wrong?” Rollan peered over her shoulder.

“It seems like Tembo took off and left behind this journal with a note for the monks.” She turned the page again and pointed to the words written in square, blocky letters. They were different from the rest of the journal. “It says, and I quote ... ” Meilin read the words carefully. “*I depart as you wish, but in light of what is written, the orb carries on to no one, and the key to finding Stormspeaker is nowhere to be found.*”

“He’d rather destroy them than have the monks guard them?” Takoda took a step back. “Why?”

“No.” Conor shook his head. “A Greencloak wouldn’t do that with something so important. There has to be a mistake,” Conor insisted. “Read it again.” His vision had led them to this place for a reason. Even though something made him wary, he *knew* they were on the right track. They were close, he was sure of it.

Rollan read over Meilin’s shoulder. “That’s what it says. I don’t think it means that he destroyed it, but he probably hid it in such a way that he thought no one would ever find it.”

The bookshelves appeared to shift under the light of the oil lamp as Anka moved away from the far corner. “Well, we have to go look for the hiding place,” Anka said. “We didn’t come all this way for nothing.”

Xanthe sighed. “But where do you start? Do you have any other leads?”

Conor thought about the vision that had brought them here. Perhaps they weren’t supposed to be searching for the bond tokens in Nilo. Maybe that was what they needed to discover. That the answers were somewhere else. “Maybe we should move on to Zhong. Try to find answers there.”

“No. We can’t simply move on because this didn’t pan out,” Anka countered. “Since when do Greencloaks give up?” She paused, allowing her words to sink in. “Stormspeaker could still be here, and Kovo might have some answers. We can ask him again,” she suggested. “He probably knows about Tembo.”

“You’re right, but this time you can do the asking,” Rollan replied. “I think I may have pushed my luck with that gorilla. Maybe he’ll like that now-you-see-me, now-you-don’t trick.”

“No, Kovo is off-limits,” Takoda stated. “I won’t put him at risk. He may not look it, but he’s very fragile right now.”

Rollan opened his mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

“Anka’s right, though... We have to try other options. Why don’t we look through more records?” Meilin walked around the room. “There are different libraries in this monastery, right? So there must be other books and scrolls. Maybe we can find a clue somewhere else.”

“I’ll go find Master Naveb,” Takoda suggested, heading toward the door. “He may have an idea of where we should start. I’ll be right back.” Then he disappeared into the shadow of the hallway.

“So what do we do while we wait? Just start going through all these books?” Xanthe pulled a random book from the shelf and flipped to a page in the center. “Looking for what?”

“Anything. Something.” Abeke opened a book on ancient Niloan homes. “Maybe someone else wrote about Tembo’s visit and where he went. We can’t give up.”

“No one is quitting,” Rollan reiterated from the other side of the room. “There’s an answer here ... somewhere.”

Conor meandered around the room. “I never said anything about *quitting*,” he muttered. “It was only a suggestion.”

Meilin held out her hand, and with a flash of light, Jhi appeared next to her. The large panda glanced around, noticed that there was no danger in the room, and plopped down on her hind legs.

“Meilin!” Abeke exclaimed in a hushed voice. “We told Takoda we wouldn’t bring out our spirit animals. Don’t you think I want Uraza with me?”

“Uraza doesn’t help you see all sides of a problem like Jhi does,” Meilin countered, stroking the side of the panda’s large neck where the white fur met the black. “Plus, we’re the only ones in here.” Meilin leaned closer and whispered something to Jhi.

Jhi nodded and closed her eyes as Meilin did the same.

Conor thought of Briggan. He wanted to run his hand over the wolf’s silver back and feel the energy that always seemed to fill him up when they were together. Briggan understood him like no one else. Sometimes

it felt as if the two of them shared a more personal bond than any of the other Greencloaks did with their spirit animals. It was as if they were both cut from the same cloth. Twin souls.

But now wasn't the time to have him there. It was time for Conor to focus on what he could for the mission. If only he had some control over his visions. He stared at Tembo's journal, still open on the desk, willing himself into a trance. No vision came to him, but from where he stood he did notice that some of the letters in the journal seemed to be off-center.

Conor approached the desk slowly, cocked his head to the side, and squinted his eyes. He studied the words carefully. The *W* was definitely written differently than the other block letters. It was in the calligraphy-like style found in the rest of the journal.

"Um, everyone. I think you need to come over here." His eyes stayed on the page, as if shifting them away might make it all disappear.

"Do we have to?" Rollan had sat down in a corner with a stack of books on either side of him. "Can't you just tell us what you're thinking?"

"It's about Tembo and what he wrote." Conor held up the book. He may not have been the strongest reader in the group, but he knew that the words he saw weren't the same ones Meilin had read. A smile crept over Conor's face. The poor shepherd boy had figured it out all on his own. "I think I found our next clue ... and it was right here all along. Written in plain sight."



SAND SCROLL

“**W**HAT DO YOU MEAN IT WAS RIGHT THERE?” ROLLAN asked, slowly getting up from the floor. It was late and he didn’t want to play games. “We all saw what was in the book. Tembo said he hid it somewhere that no one could find.”

“Not quite.” Conor set the book back down on the desk and put his fingertip on one of the last words written at the bottom of the page. “Look carefully at the letters.”

Rollan and the others gathered around Conor and stared at the book. Rollan didn’t understand what was supposed to be happening. The words hadn’t changed.

the key to finding Stormspeaker is nowhere to be found.

“Conor, we’re all tired.” Rollan rubbed his right eye. “Can you just tell us what you’re thinking?”

“The *w* in *nowhere*. Look. Don’t you see it?” Conor pointed to the letter as Abeke stared at the book. “The way it’s written, it could be part of the word or there could be a little space after it.”

“So?” Xanthe tucked a lock of her white hair behind her ear as she squeezed by Jhi to get a better look. “How does that—”

“That changes everything!” Abeke exclaimed, throwing her arms around Conor in a big bear hug. “You’re a genius!”

Rollan shook his head. Maybe he was too tired after a long day of trekking through Nilo and climbing up to the monastery, but he still

didn't understand what they were talking about. Usually by this point he could rely on Meilin to say something that would bring it all into focus, but she'd become quiet and pensive. Rollan knew this was Jhi's influence, allowing her to study a situation from different perspectives, but it was still unnerving to him. He liked Meilin's normal take-no-prisoners attitude.

"Look." Conor motioned for Rollan to get closer. "If you read *nowhere* as two separate words"—he placed his finger under the word—"it says that the key to finding Stormspeaker is *now here* to be found." He let out a little sigh. "But 'here' is a pretty big place, and we still don't know where to start looking."

Meilin stood still, biting her bottom lip while staring at the journal. She had one hand buried in Jhi's fur and the other just hung by her side.

"Meilin." Xanthe said her name softly. "Are you okay?"

"Mm-hm," Meilin muttered absentmindedly. Then she blinked, her mouth twitched, and the edges of her lips curled up.

Rollan could sense that the Meilin he knew was coming back. "Oh, she's got something." He felt the energy in the room shift. He loved that Meilin had that effect on people and situations.

"I knew it!" Takoda barged into the library. "I said not to bring out any of the Great Beasts and you did it anyway. Kovo is restless, and it's because Jhi's here."

Abeke's face hardened. "His being bothered by having such a kind and peaceful soul as Jhi in the monastery says more about Kovo and his lack of growth than anything else could." She rolled back her shoulders. "We needed answers, and Jhi is the only Great Beast who could, *or would*, help."

Meilin rubbed Jhi's back. "Thank you, my friend," she whispered as she held out her arm. "I'll bring you out again soon." Jhi glanced at Takoda and dipped her head. In a flash of light she disappeared, once again becoming a tattoo on Meilin's hand.

"I don't mean to be rude.... It's just the way things have to be." Takoda seemed embarrassed. "I couldn't find Master Naveb and then Kovo started to—"

"Doesn't matter," Rollan interrupted. "Conor figured out that the clue is here, and I think Meilin knows something more." He held back a mischievous smile. "If her highness is ready to share it with the rest of us."

Meilin rolled her eyes. “All right ... ” She walked in front of the desk, then glanced back at Rollan. “You think you can keep up?” she teased.

Rollan laughed. “Oh, I can more than keep up. Just try me!”

In the light of the broken oil lamp, Rollan could see Meilin’s cheeks turning pink with their little banter.

“So what is it?” Anka asked from somewhere in the room.

Meilin pointed to the page numbers on the bottom corner of each page. “Tembo wasn’t only clever about using the words *now* and *here*.... He also put another clue for everyone to see.” She pointed to the page number written on the last page. “This page should be 147, since the one before is 146, but it’s numbered 159.”

“So there are pages missing,” Conor reasoned. “Someone tore them out.”

Meilin shook her head. “No, nothing seems to be missing, and the five in 159 isn’t how Tembo wrote his other number fives. It actually looks more like an S.”

“One-S-nine?” Rollan was puzzled. “What does that mean?”

Meilin bit her lip. “That’s what I don’t know.”

“One-S-nine,” Takoda repeated. “One *Scroll* nine. That’s how we catalog all our ancient scrolls. Library One, scroll number nine!”

“Tembo could have listed the location of Stormspeaker there!” Rollan put his hands on Takoda’s shoulders and turned him around to face the door. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go find it.”

Takoda wiggled away. “Library One is our original library, where our most ancient records are kept. No one goes in there without permission from Master Naveb. No one.”

“Seriously?” Meilin put her hands on her hips. “You’re not going to help us get it?”

“I don’t think that’s what he meant.” Xanthe stepped in. “Takoda has permission to go inside. He can get it and bring it back here for us.” She glanced at Takoda and widened her eyes. “Right? Isn’t *that* what you meant?”

Takoda didn’t say anything, and Rollan certainly didn’t like the idea. “But what if there are other clues over there? Something Takoda might overlook. Stormspeaker itself might be hidden inside.”

“I wouldn’t miss anything,” Takoda corrected. “If it’s there, I’d see it.”

“Exactly.” Xanthe nodded. “So Takoda will take care of it. Isn’t that so, Takoda?”

“It’s not the way things are supposed to work, but ... ”

Xanthe placed her hand on Takoda’s arm and he grew quiet. “Then it’s settled!” Xanthe said brightly.

Takoda looked down at Xanthe’s hand still on his arm. He smiled and nodded.

“The window!” Xanthe abruptly shouted, pointing to the far side of the room.

Everyone turned to look as Xanthe darted toward it.

“What is it?” Anka asked, already by the window.

“A pair of eyes,” Xanthe muttered, staring into the dark night. “I think it was a bird peering in, because it took off when I pointed.”

Xanthe thrust open the window and looked out. The night breeze slipped into the room, causing the flame of the oil lamp to flicker.

“At this time of night, maybe it was an owl?” Takoda suggested. “Though I’ve never seen one up here.”

A shriek in the distance echoed through the room.

Rollan knew exactly who made that noise.

Essix.

“I think I know who that was.” Rollan smiled. “My faithful companion didn’t want to come in. She’s just letting us know she’s nearby.”

“But isn’t Essix really big?” Xanthe leaned a little farther out the window, still scanning the sky. “I don’t think this bird was that large.”

“It’s really dark and you were pretty far away.... How could you tell?” Anka asked.

“Being from Sadre, where there’s no sunlight, I can usually see better at night. But maybe I was wrong.” Xanthe let out a deep sigh. “My eyesight has changed since I’ve been aboveground ... one of the negatives of being here, I guess.”

Takoda walked over to Xanthe. “You still have the best nighttime vision of anyone I know,” he said softly. “We’ll visit Phos Astos soon, and then I’ll be the one who can’t see too well.” He leaned over the windowsill and pulled the window closed. “So let’s keep this closed, in case Essix changes her mind.” Takoda smiled and glanced over at the Greencloaks. “At least while I go to Library One and get the scroll for all of us to read.”



Rollan wasn't sure where Library One was located, but it couldn't have been too far, because Takoda returned within minutes, a little out of breath. In one hand he held a large rolled-up scroll, and in the other was an oil lantern.

"Here it is," Takoda said, hanging up the lantern. "I don't think anyone has read this in a very long time." He blew off a large layer of dust as Rollan helped unfurl the scroll over the desk.

"It's an academic study of the desert sands," Xanthe said, standing on the other side of Takoda. "Different types of minerals, how they shift with the wind, what plants grow best in each sand. Does this help you at all?"

Rollan didn't respond. He had made sure to stand next to Takoda so he wouldn't be the last one to figure out the clue this time. He wanted to prove to everyone, especially Meilin, that he had more than just street smarts.

They spent close to an hour reading through the scroll. Rollan's eyes felt as if they were beginning to cross, and the words were swimming around on the paper. He wasn't any closer to finding Stormspeaker.

"I've lived around deserts all my life—" Abeke yawned, interrupting herself. "And I never thought someone could write this much about ... *sand.*"

"Why not?" Rollan touched the Heart of the Land, the amber stone hanging on a chain under his shirt. He knew that sand, like dirt, could shape a continent. "It's a powerful part of the earth."

Abeke rolled her eyes. "You think I don't know that?" She shook her head. "Don't forget, *I'm* the one from Nilo. I've seen sand carried in a windstorm causing the sun to be blocked out and turning the day into night. It's overtaken whole villages, covering everything. You probably haven't seen anything like that in Amaya."

Conor raised both his hands to put a stop to the bickering. "Listen, we're all tired and there doesn't seem to be anything here. Maybe if we go to sleep and look at it again in the morning light, we'll figure something out."

Rollan thought back to Tembo's note. There was something written about a light. "Where's the journal?" Rollan lifted up the scroll and placed the book on top. He went to where the final note was written. He read over it again.

In light of what is written, the orb carries on to no one, and the key to finding Stormspeaker is nowhere to be found.

“Could it be?” Rollan muttered, picking up the scroll and carrying it over to where the lantern hung on the wall.

“What are you doing?” Meilin asked, following him.

“I have an idea.” Rollan raised the parchment paper up to the light. “Tembo said ‘in light of what is written.’ Maybe he meant you needed *light* in order to see the key to finding Stormspeaker and the orb.” He slowly moved the scroll across the glass of the lantern, letting the light shine through.

“There!” Anka exclaimed, showing herself to be standing next to Meilin. “There’s something written on the edge!”

Rollan moved the corner of the parchment paper in front of the lantern’s glass. The light from the flame revealed a previously invisible message written in the same calligraphy style as Tembo’s journal. It said:

To unify all, a valiant soul must seek the face in the mountain by passing through the valley of death where skulls fill the fields in the shadow of winter, then drain the demon’s blood and walk through the clouds to arrive at the edge of the land. For when this is done the queen’s glory shall be revealed.

“Valley of death? Demon’s blood? Edge of the land?” Rollan grimaced. He didn’t like any of it. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“But the face in the mountain ...” Takoda smiled. “I think I can help you with that part.” He looked at Xanthe. “Remember how Sodu kept talking about seeing a face in the mountain when he came back from the spiritual journey Naveb sent him on? He thought that it was a sign of his manhood.”

“He saw a mountain spirit?” Meilin asked.

Xanthe chuckled. “No, not a spirit ... just a rock formation in one of the mountains that’s a few days east of here.”

“But no one’s mentioned a place called the valley of death,” Takoda said. “Or a field full of skulls. Then again, this was written a long time ago. Things could have changed.”

“We can go to that mountain and maybe find the valley along the way.” Abeke yawned again, causing a ripple effect with everyone in the room. “We’ll head out in the morning. Let our brains work on it while we sleep.”

Takoda nodded as a faint tapping sound reverberated in the distance. “I’ll find you some soft beds for the night.”

“That’s perfect.” Meilin stretched her arms. “We haven’t had a comfortable night’s sleep in a while.”

The *tap-tap-tap* noise was getting closer. Through his sluggishness, Rollan recognized what it was. “I think Master Naveb is about to pay us another visit.” He rolled up the scroll and handed it back to Takoda. “Think it’s better if you’re holding this when he gets here. I don’t need to be scolded again.”

Conor walked to the door and opened it for the old monk. The now rapid beat of the cane hitting the stone floor echoed through the hallway. “We can ask him about the—”

Conor was cut off by the old monk storming into the library. Master Naveb’s brows were furrowed and his cheeks were flushed from walking so quickly.

“You must all leave at once!” Master Naveb announced. “The Oathbound are on their way!”



BIRD THIEF

ALL TRACE OF THE EXHAUSTION THAT HAD BEEN tugging at Conor's limbs evaporated with the announcement that the Oathbound had found them once again. It seemed that no matter what they did or where they went, the Oathbound somehow anticipated their every move. The Greencloaks were placing everyone they encountered in jeopardy.

"Are you sure they're coming here?" Rollan asked. "No one knew where we were going. We didn't even know that we'd end up here!"

Master Naveb nodded. "They may not have known before, but Sodu is making sure they know now."

"He betrayed us?" Conor couldn't believe it. There were traitors around every corner.

"Sodu?" Takoda repeated, his face still registering the shock of it. "It can't be." He shook his head in denial. "No, he might not have agreed with having the Greencloaks here, but I can't believe he would betray this place. He truly believes in it."

"Perhaps I was too rough with him. Backed him into a corner." Master Naveb sighed. "Regardless of the reason, he tried to enlist a few in the monastery to go with him into town. He thinks he can strike a deal with the Oathbound. The five of you in exchange for an assurance that the monastery will be left intact."

"The Oathbound will never honor any agreement." Rollan began pacing around the room. "We need to leave right away."

"How much time do we have?" Meilin asked.

“Five, maybe six hours.” Master Naveb motioned for two young monks to come into the library. They each held several bags and placed them on the floor by the window. “One of the sentries said they left about two hours ago.” Master Naveb pointed to the bags. “I brought you some supplies, along with a map to help you on your journey. Don’t tell any of us where you are headed. Just go ... and be careful.”

“We’ll help guide them.” Xanthe knelt down and opened one of the bags. “Thank you, Master Naveb ... for everything.”

Takoda grabbed Xanthe by the arm. “We can’t go,” he whispered. “I can’t leave Kovo here in his condition, and he won’t go into passive state.”

“Then you stay,” she answered. “I’m helping our friends. I’m a Sadrean warrior, not a librarian. I’ll be more helpful outside. I know this area, and you said it yourself: No one sees better at night than me.”

“Xanthe, please ... ” Takoda’s eyes pleaded with her. He was caught choosing between his spirit animal and someone who was obviously special to him.

“We can go on our own,” Abeke said, already slinging one of the bags over her shoulder. “We’ve done it before. Nilo is home for me. We don’t need the extra help.”

Xanthe ignored both Abeke and Takoda. “Master Naveb, did you bring my special cloak, the one I use during daylight?”

The old monk nodded. “It’s over there.” He pointed to a bag closest to the window. “I suspected you might want to go with them.”

Xanthe hustled over to the bag, her pale skin reflecting the moonlight that streamed through the window. She slipped on a sand-colored cloak and looked at the Greencloaks. “Ready?”

“Xanthe, you don’t have to do this.” Conor knew how much she’d given up during the battle with the Wyrms. She was once again abandoning her home and the people she cared about. “Abeke is an amazing tracker and guide.”

“No disrespect is meant by this.” Xanthe’s eyes met Abeke’s. “But I’m your best bet to get out of here. You don’t know this area like I do.” She picked up one of the bags and tossed it to Meilin. “We can each contribute something to the mission.”

“She has a point.” Meilin flipped the bag over her shoulder. “We could definitely use her help. She’s a strong fighter, too.”

Xanthe looked back at Takoda. “I understand why you need to stay, but you can still help them by finding more information on the Dragon’s Eye. There has to be another clue in the message.” Xanthe leaned closer to Takoda and, in front of everyone, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll come back. Promise.”

Takoda didn’t say anything else. Conor wasn’t sure if his silence was from the kiss or from knowing that there wasn’t any point in discussing it further. The matter had been settled. Xanthe was going with them.



The group left the monastery the same way they’d arrived: down the rope ladders and through the fissure, until they came to the Taabara Chasm. Once there, they called out Briggan and Uraza to help guard against any Oathbound attack.

For the next few hours, Xanthe led them over several rocky hills until the ground evened out and became flat. By the light of the small lanterns they carried, Conor could tell that they had entered a large savannah. According to Naveb’s map, they were now just west of the mountains where Sodu had his spiritual journey and where he had described seeing the face in the mountain. If they continued at their current pace, they’d probably be there in two or three days’ time.

As the group approached a small acacia tree, Anka stopped walking and leaned against its trunk. “I don’t know about all of you, but I’m exhausted. I think we should make camp for a few hours. Try to get some rest.”

Conor reached down and stroked Briggan, who was leaning against his leg. “I agree. It’ll be daybreak in a few hours, and the sun will drain us even more. We need to be alert.”

Xanthe looked around, her pink eyes searching the surroundings. “I don’t see any other trees in the distance, so this is probably as good a place as any.”

“Agreed.” Abeke dropped her bag and sat on the savannah’s grass. Uraza circled her twice before deciding on a spot next to Abeke. The leopard let her long tail curl around Abeke’s ankle, but the tension in her muscles showed she was not there to relax. Her ears twitched and her eyes scanned the tall grass that surrounded them. Uraza was in full hunting mode, ready to protect the group.

Conor plopped exhaustedly to the ground. His eyes were heavy and he had a hard time keeping them open. He rested his head against Briggan, knowing that the wolf would stay vigilant with Uraza.

“Maybe Xanthe should keep watch while we sleep,” Anka suggested, her voice penetrating the darkness even if her form didn’t. “She can see better than the rest of us.”

“Of course.” Xanthe nodded, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the group. “I’ll make sure to wake you if I notice anything.”

Meilin held out her hand and, in a brief flash, Jhi appeared. The large panda promptly curled up on the ground, squashing the tall grass around her. Meilin settled in next to her. “I won’t need much time to get reenergized,” she said, stifling a yawn. “Jhi helps me relax more than I could ever imagine. I’ll be ready for a full day with just a couple of hours. I can switch with Xanthe at that point.”

Rollan took out a piece of fruit that Naveb had packed and sat down, leaning against the tree trunk. A bird called out from somewhere in the tree.

“That sounded like a macaw,” Rollan said, lifting his head to search the limbs for the bright blue feathers and yellow beak.

“Caw!” The bird repeated its call.

Rollan put the piece of fruit on top of his bag and stood up, peering into the moonlight.

A flutter of wings beat past him and snagged the piece of fruit before flying back to its perch in the tree. The thief was a fork-tailed, glossy black bird.

“Hey!” Rollan shook the tree. “That was mine!”

The bird responded by pooping right on Rollan’s bag.

Everyone—except Rollan—burst into laughter.

“You just got fooled by a drongo,” Abeke said, still laughing. “They’re notorious for mimicking other birds in order to steal food. But it’s a good thing it’s here. They’re also great at warning when a predator approaches.”

“Yeah, well ... ” Rollan moved his bag from beneath the drongo’s reach and cleaned off the top with a small rock. “Helpful or not, I’m going to have drongo stew if it drops any other presents on my stuff during the night.”

“Why don’t you curl up over there with Jhi?” Conor suggested. “I don’t think Essix is much of a cuddler, and we all need some rest.”

Rollan glanced over at Jhi's black-and-white form next to Meilin. "Think Jhi would be okay if I used her as a big pillow?" Rollan asked Meilin.

"Hrrgmmfani," Meilin muttered, already half-asleep.

"I'll take that as a yes." Rollan curled up against the panda and she gave him a big lick on the head. "Panda slobber isn't necessary, Jhi. I'm tired, not hurt."

Through half-closed eyes, Conor watched as Jhi gave Rollan another lick ... just for good measure.



It was dawn when a shrill, metallic shriek sounded from the tree.

Briggan growled, low and guttural, and Conor immediately sat up, his sleepiness falling away like a heavy cloak.

A few feet away, Abeke was already kneeling and pulling out her bow. Uraza crouched, somewhat hidden in the tall grass, looking ready to pounce.

"Something's out there," Xanthe whispered, staring at the savannah. "But it's hidden in the grass."

Meilin was squatting, her sword in one hand, as she called Jhi back into passive state. The disappearance of the panda caused Rollan to fall back with a start.

"Hey! What's the big ... " He glanced at everyone and quickly pulled out his dagger, taking a defensive posture. "Is it the Oathbound? Are they out there?"

"Not sure," Abeke answered. The group stayed low, putting their backs together in a tight circle formation, with an eye out in every direction. Uraza and Briggan both had their hackles raised.

Conor slowly pulled out his ax. He glanced over at Briggan, who stood stiff-legged, eyes focused on something in the distance.

Someone was definitely out there.

The drongo gave another shrill cry and flew away.

"Anka, are you up for this?" Meilin slowly moved her sword around in the air as Abeke nocked an arrow onto her bowstring.

"Seriously?" Anka said, clearly annoyed at the insinuation. "I'm a pretty decent fighter, Meilin.... You should know that." Anka's cloak and dark hair flickered into view as she revealed her position next to Xanthe. She was holding her quarterstaff as Toey, her spirit animal, scampered

into her boot. Then just as quickly, she blended back into her surroundings. “You’ve been training me, and by now I may even know all your tricks.”

“Yeah, yeah, let’s not get too cocky.” Meilin continued staring out into the savannah, her expression focused.

Laughter rang out across the savannah. It was coming from somewhere to the east of them.

Then more laughter.

A chorus from all sides.

Whoever was out there seemed to find the entire situation very funny.

“Seriously? The Oathbound think this is a joke?” Rollan rolled back his shoulders, getting ready for the fight. “I’ll show them something that’s not too funny.”

“No.” Abeke’s fingers twitched as she steadied her bow. “I recognize that sound. It’s not the Oathbound.”

“Who is it, then?” Conor asked, tightening his grip on his ax. “Are they dangerous?”

“Hyenas.” Abeke’s eyes narrowed as Uraza snarled at something in the tall grass in front of her. “And when they’re in a pack, they’re more than dangerous ... they’re absolutely deadly.”



BATTLEGROUND

ABEKE COULD SENSE THE HYENAS CREEPING CLOSER through the savannah. She opened her stance, raised her right elbow, and pulled the bow's string as far back as possible to get maximum power. In that instant, Abeke became one with her surroundings. Her friends' restlessness fell away as she focused on her own breathing and heartbeat. Uraza was augmenting her hunting instincts. Abeke could smell the predators' scent in the air, feel the wind glide by her cheek, and see the slight shifts in the blades of tall grass. Her fingertips relaxed, putting enough pressure on the arrow to keep it in place until the moment demanded its release.

She waited patiently. She was no longer the hunted, but the hunter.

Thwack!

Abeke released the arrow as she caught sight of a hyena lunging toward them. "Here they come!" she yelled to her friends, knowing she'd just hit her first mark.

Uraza leaped forward, claws out and teeth bared. She grabbed one of the hyenas by the neck and flipped it over, just as two more jumped on top of her. Abeke aimed at one of the hyenas, but couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Uraza.

The leopard rolled on the ground, shaking off the doglike creatures, but not before one of them sank its teeth into her hide. Uraza roared, infuriated at being bitten, and gave chase to her attacker through the grassland.

Abeke turned her attention to Rollan and Xanthe, who had teamed up to battle against a group of smaller but persistent hyenas. They were pushing that group back toward the east. On the other side, Briggan was already in pursuit of a pack that had charged all at once. He chased them through the tall grass, losing sight of one for a moment before catching a glimpse of another and taking off in its direction.

Meanwhile, several hundred yards away, Meilin and Conor were fighting at close range against two of the larger animals. They had been forced away from the campsite, but Meilin had the upper hand, using her sword to jab and slash at the persistent hyena. Conor had taken a defensive stance behind her, wielding his ax in one hand and a knife in the other.

“Keep it up!” Meilin shouted. “We’ve got them on the run.”

The hyenas were spreading out and seemed to be disbanding, but Abeke sensed that something was wrong. Why would these highly intelligent hunters attack a group of humans and large predators? And though the hyenas had worked together, the Greencloaks had pushed most of them back relatively easily. Abeke spun around.

That’s when she saw it ... the real plan.

These animals were doing what they always did. A coordinated attack to get what they truly wanted ... an easy target. Separate what they viewed as the weakest member of the herd. The large-scale attack had been a distraction to split the group into different corners, leaving the campsite with only Anka protecting their bags and food.

Anka.

Even though she was older than all of them, she would be seen as the slightest in the group. If the hyenas had spotted her at some point while the Greencloaks were sleeping, she could have become the hyenas’ target.

“It’s Anka!” Abeke yelled. “They’re after her!” Abeke rushed back toward the tree with the other Greencloaks.

As if on cue, six snarling hyenas jumped out from the tall grass, and in the moonlight Abeke could see them surrounding Anka. Anka spun around to face each one. The colors of her clothes and skin rippled as she blended into her surroundings and disappeared from view. The hyenas paused, confused because they could still smell her. The grass shifted and Anka reappeared a few feet away. One of the hyenas was done playing cat and mouse and lunged forward.

Abeke shot an arrow straight into its neck, dropping it on the spot.

“Having a hard time believing your eyes?” Anka taunted the remaining five animals. She twirled her quarterstaff and kicked up some dust, her cloak rippling and changing colors as she faded out of sight. The hyenas drew closer. Then one yelped as she hit it hard enough that it went flying through the air. “How’d you like that?” Anka shouted, already standing somewhere else, while another hyena whimpered in agony.

The Greencloaks watched in amazement. Anka was anything but the weakest of the group.

“Don’t stand there staring!” Anka called out. “Get the rest of them!”

Meilin ran forward with her sword held high above her head while Abeke unleashed an arrow that grazed the side of a hyena. Conor, Rollan, and Xanthe charged in to help, but there was already a whooping call in the distance. The hyenas turned and retreated back into the grasslands.

“That was amazing,” Conor remarked as they all regrouped at the campsite. “I didn’t know you could fight like that.”

“You handled them like a pro,” Abeke added while pulling out her arrow from the dead hyena.

“Meilin is a good teacher,” Anka said, calling Toey into passive state on her arm. Instantly her features looked crisper. Once the natural camouflage tendencies that Toey imparted were removed, Abeke could see the glimmer in Anka’s eyes as she smiled. Abeke could sense that Anka was proud of herself. “Not sure how I would’ve done against the Oathbound, but hyenas were good for my first real one-on-one challenge.”

“You’ve definitely come a long way.” Meilin picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder. Uraza and Briggan were nearby, each resting next to a fallen hyena that they’d brought over. “Guess we can all eat hyena meat for our next meal.”

Rollan rubbed his belly. “Yum. Well, it beats them eating some Greencloak meat for *their* next meal.” He smiled. “Don’t think they’d like it anyway. We’re way too tough to chew.”

Abeke chuckled. Rollan always had a way of lightening the mood.

Suddenly, Essix screeched and circled high above them.

“Look who finally shows up ... after the fight is over,” Rollan said, lifting up his arm in case the gyrfalcon wanted to perch there.

Essix dove straight toward Rollan, twisting only at the last moment to avoid colliding with him. Abeke had to duck to escape getting pummeled.

“Hey!” Abeke glanced up at the falcon, who was swooping down once more. “He was only kidding.”

Rollan frowned, his eyes trained on the majestic bird. He looked worried.

“Something’s wrong.” Rollan sat down on the lush grass. “Essix needs to show me something.” He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths before settling into a quiet rhythm.

Xanthe pulled the map out from under her cloak. “We have to go that way ... toward those mountains.” She pointed east. “But did you see who else headed that way?”

“The hyenas,” Meilin and Conor answered in unison.

Abeke nodded. “They’ll be tracking us. Waiting for us to drop our guard.”

Rollan swayed a bit and mumbled something.

Meilin bent down next to him. “What do you see?”

Rollan didn’t answer at first, but then he popped his eyes open. “Oathbound. Still pretty far, but headed this way.” He stood up and pointed to the west. “Coming from that direction. I counted seven of them on camels.”

“So let’s go.” Xanthe buttoned her hooded cloak, making sure she was fully covered from head to toe.

“And one of them has a grizzly bear as a spirit animal,” Rollan added. “It was helping them track us.”

“Ugh, that’s really not good news.” Conor grimaced. “Grizzlies have one of the best senses of smell. We have to do something to shake them off our scent.”

Abeke turned to look at the remnants of their campsite. Squashed grass, dead hyenas, blood on the ground ... anyone would know they’d been there. “Hold on,” Abeke said. “Let’s not go too fast.”

“You sense something?” Conor asked as he gazed at Briggan. The wolf looked content to bathe in the warm sun that was rising in the east. “Briggan and Uraza seem okay.”

Abeke thought about what Master Naveb had told her. A good hunter doesn’t always lunge forward, but takes in what is around and behind them. They could turn this into an advantage to throw off the trackers.

“What if the hyenas had won?” Abeke mused out loud. “If they had killed us while we slept?”

“What are you saying?” Xanthe shifted her weight from one foot to another. “Are you worried that the hyenas will get us next time? Because they won’t.”

“No, I’m wondering if we can get the Oathbound to think that, though.”

“Oh ...” Meilin gave a slow nod. “Fake our deaths.”

“Or have them think at least a couple of us died here.” Conor walked around to one of the dead hyenas. “We can bloody up a couple of our cloaks and leave them here. Make it seem like the hyenas carried some of us off. Maybe they’ll think we separated and there was only a small group here. Then they might go back to report what they found and start a new search.”

“But won’t the bear just pick up our trail when we continue across the savannah toward the mountains?” Xanthe watched as Conor ripped his bag with the corner of his ax and tossed it aside.

“Not necessarily.” Abeke glanced at Rollan. “Especially if we aren’t going *over* the savannah.”

Rollan nodded with a smile. “That’s where I come in.” He pulled out the chain around his neck where the Heart of the Land hung. “We won’t leave a trail over the savannah because we’ll be going under it.” He gave Xanthe a wink. “It’ll be like going home for you.”

“What? I don’t understand.” Xanthe watched as Rollan walked to a patch of barren, sandy dirt next to Abeke. He clutched the gila monster amulet in his fist and punched the ground.

Abeke jumped aside. She felt a small tremor, then a more powerful one, as the earth opened up right next to her, forming a sinkhole. Down at the bottom there was an opening to what looked to be a tunnel.

“How?” Xanthe had a mixed expression of fear and amazement. “What ... what is that thing?” She pointed to the amulet in Rollan’s hand.

“A bond token,” Rollan said, as if that were enough of an explanation. “It has a legendary gila monster’s power to move the earth.”

“You’re getting pretty good at using it,” Meilin whispered. “Impressive.”

Abeke expected Rollan to dismiss the praise with a smart-mouthed comment, but he simply smiled and stayed quiet. Meilin definitely had a

positive effect on him.

“Now that we have our way out ... ” Conor pointed to his ripped cloak lying on the ground. “Who else wants to give up their cloak and pretend to have been eaten alive?”

Abeke knew that there was no way Rollan would relinquish Tarik’s green cloak. It meant too much to him. The rest of them were wearing the nondescript cloaks they’d picked up in Eura, so it made sense for one of them to leave theirs behind.

“I’ll do it.” Abeke began untying the cord around her neck. “This slows me down anyway.”

“No.” Xanthe put a hand on Abeke’s arm. “For the plan to work, it has to be me. There’s no other choice.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Meilin exclaimed. “You’re the only one who can’t give up her cloak. You need to have a special covering to protect you from the sun.”

Xanthe shook her head. “If the trackers came from the monastery, Sodu could have given them something from my room to track my scent. It has to be my cloak.”

Essix squawked as he flew in circles above them once again.

“We don’t have much time.” Rollan gave Essix a signal, letting her know that he understood the message. “What Xanthe said makes sense. Plus, we’ll stay underground for most of the day. She should be fine.”

“I’ll give her my cloak when we move aboveground,” Abeke said. “That’ll help a little.”

“Scatter whatever’s in my bag around the campsite and let’s go!” Xanthe tossed her cloak to Conor and jumped into the sinkhole, disappearing into the tunnel opening.

“I think it’s a good plan,” Abeke said, pulling Uraza back into passive state. “Then again, it’s our only plan, so ... ”

“Um, this tunnel ends after a few feet,” Xanthe shouted from down below.

Rollan peered into the sinkhole. “Yeah, I can’t move that much earth at once. When we’re all down there, I’ll keep pushing the dirt out of the way and close it in behind us.”

“Bring my lantern!” Xanthe reminded him. “You’ll need it down here.”

“Already got it.” Rollan tapped the small lantern he’d secured to the outside of his bag. “I’ll toss our bags down first.”

“And I’ll catch them,” Anka replied from the bottom of the pit. Her skin had already shifted to mimic the coloring of the shadowy hole ... which meant Toey was back.

“When ... how did you ... ?” Rollan shrugged off his own question. “Careful, this one is heavy,” he said to Anka as he tossed the first of the bags.

“What do you think?” Conor held up Xanthe’s blood-spattered cloak to Abeke and Meilin. It had a large rip from where Briggan had torn into it. Conor had already staged the campsite as if there had been an epic battle, with two of the hyenas left behind as casualties, and a few items from their bags thrown around.

Meilin surveyed the area. “Looks pretty convincing,” she said. She’d covered up most of their footprints in the dirt. Now it really seemed as if only two people had been at the campsite.

“Yeah, I think so too.” Conor held out his arm. “Briggan, you’ll probably appreciate not being in that cramped tunnel for hours.” The gray wolf leaped toward Conor, disappearing in a flash and reappearing as the tattoo below his elbow.

Essix had flown back and perched herself on Rollan’s shoulder. “How about it, Essix? You won’t be able to track us while we’re underground. Going into passive state would be—” A flash of light indicated that the gyrfalcon didn’t need any more convincing.

“Guess she agreed with you,” Conor said, walking to the edge of the sinkhole. “Now, let’s go find that valley.”

“Um, yeah, I was going to say something about that.” Abeke surveyed the mountains in the distance one last time as she stood next to Rollan and Conor. “We’re supposed to go to a valley of death and find a field filled with skulls ... but have we stopped to think that those skulls might be from people entering the valley of death?”

“Oh, I’ve thought about it.” Rollan sighed. “Just don’t *like* thinking about it too much, if you know what I mean.”

Conor shrugged. “It’s not like we have much of a choice. We have to go wherever Tembo took Stormspeaker.”

“True, but ... ” Meilin tossed her bag into the sinkhole and looked at the three other Greencloaks. “We have to be careful. Hyenas and the Oathbound may be the least of our troubles.”

For a moment none of the Greencloaks said a word, breathing in the last bit of fresh air they’d have for a while. Then the four of them leaped

into the shadowy pit.



UNDERGROUND TOUR

THE GLOW FROM THE LANTERN BOUNCED OFF THE earthen walls as Rollan continued pushing aside the ground, creating a tunnel ahead of the group and allowing it to collapse once the last person was through. They'd been crawling on their hands and knees in single file, to minimize the amount of earth Rollan had to move, but it still took considerable effort and concentration. At one point, they considered taking turns using the bond token, but though it could be used by anyone, no one knew how to use it as well as Rollan. The risk of having the tunnel collapse on top of them was too great.

It had been about six or seven hours since they'd left the campsite, or at least that's what Meilin figured, based on the growling of her stomach. Xanthe had been able to keep them headed east, using her strange ability to navigate while underground by sensing Erdas's magnetic fields.

"I think I need a break," Rollan announced, wiping his brow and rolling onto his back. "And I'm pretty sure I've heard everyone's stomach rumble in the last few minutes."

"Should we go up and eat?" Conor asked from the rear spot in the line. "The air is becoming stagnant."

"I don't think we've gone far enough to take a chance," Abeke answered from just ahead of him. "Plus, the sun will be high in the sky, which won't help Xanthe."

"I can always stay while you go up," Xanthe offered. She'd been crawling behind Rollan while directing him where to go. "But if we're

all taking a break down here, then I have an idea.” She reached up and touched the hard dirt above her head. “This doesn’t feel as sandy as where we were. Maybe Rollan can create an airhole. In Sadre we had them in our tunnels to help the air circulate.”

Meilin peered around Xanthe to get a better look at Rollan. “What do you think? Can you do that?”

Rollan propped himself up on his elbows. “Yeah, and if we’re going to be here for more than just a couple of minutes, then I think I can make this area bigger. Just give me a little space.”

Meilin almost laughed at his request. Space was not something they could give. But she scooted back, bumping into Anka.

Rollan clasped the amber stone in his right hand and closed his eyes. He grimaced, as if lifting a heavy object. Tiny rocks started to rain down as the ground above them buckled and lifted. It wasn’t much, maybe a few feet, but it was enough.

“You did it!” Meilin sat up, happy to be vertical once again.

Rollan took a deep breath and grunted as a crack above his head widened and burst at the surface. A ray of sunlight streamed in, highlighting the dirt floor next to Rollan.

“Whew!” He collapsed onto his back with a smile on his face. “That wasn’t as easy as I thought it’d be, but you guys can call me Mr. Superstrong from now on.”

“How about we not?” Abeke said, rummaging through her bag. “And instead we offer you some water, dried fruit, and jerky?”

Rollan scooted against the side of the small cavern he had created. “Fair enough. Although you have to admit, I did a pretty good job of making this place.”

“Yes, you and the Heart of the Land,” Conor said as Abeke passed around the food.

“But more the Heart of the Land than you,” Meilin corrected. “Don’t go getting a big head.”

“Who, me?” Rollan acted shocked. “Never!”

They were all sitting in a circle. The cavern seemed to glow with the light from the lantern and the beam of sunlight streaming down from above. Meilin felt calm. She was with people she trusted, friends who had her back. She realized that she was relaxed because she felt safe, even as they headed toward a so-called valley of death. Everyone here would fight to the death for the others.

Xanthe stretched her arms out in front of her. “So this crown you’re looking for, Stormspeaker, does it do stuff like the Heart of the Land?” she asked.

Meilin bit her lip. After everything they’d been through in Sadre, battling against the Wyrms, she trusted Xanthe. But the girl wasn’t a Greencloak. She was the only one in their group who wasn’t, and it didn’t seem right to discuss their mission with her. Doubt crept into Meilin’s thoughts. Perhaps she shouldn’t be so quick to feel safe. There had been betrayals before.

The quiet lasted too long. No one had answered Xanthe, and their silence spoke volumes.

“Guess I’m not worthy of knowing those secrets,” Xanthe mumbled.

Worthy.

Meilin thought back to Worthy, and how even though he had been a Redcloak and a one-time enemy, he’d sacrificed himself for their mission. She exchanged glances with Conor, Abeke, and Rollan, but couldn’t seem to find Anka in the cavern. They were all thinking the same thing. Conor nodded, as did Abeke. Rollan shrugged noncommittally.

“It does have some type of power,” Meilin explained. “We just don’t know what it is exactly. There are four bond tokens: the Heart of the Land, which we found in Amaya. You’ve seen what it does.... ”

“The Wildcat’s Claw,” Abeke continued. “A sword that can cut through anything and shoots out fire. But we lost it during a cave-in while we were in Eura.”

“We didn’t just lose it,” Conor said. “We also lost our friend Worthy, who sacrificed himself to help us escape.”

“Oh, that’s why ... ” Xanthe nodded with new understanding. “I get it. When I mentioned not being worthy ... that’s why you all looked at each other.”

“Yes,” Meilin said. “But the truth is we don’t know what to expect from the remaining two bond tokens. Stormspeaker and the Dragon’s Eye are still mysteries to us. We know they’re probably very powerful; a bond token in the wrong hands would be a disaster. And even creating them is dangerous, as it can rip apart a spirit animal bond. The Greencloaks hid them for a reason.”

“All right, but something still puzzles me,” Xanthe said. “You think finding these bond tokens will somehow clear the Greencloaks’ name,

but how? Won't people fear that you've become even more powerful? Isn't that what got the Greencloaks into trouble in the first place?"

"There are some things that only a Greencloak would understand, Xanthe." Anka's voice was soft but strong. "No offense, but we can't share everything with you."

The conversation ended on that point, but Meilin couldn't help wonder if what Xanthe had said was true. Olvan had sent them on this mission believing that it was the only way to save the Greencloaks, but what if he was wrong? What if this made matters worse?

After a few minutes of eating in silence, Rollan spoke up. "So how much more ground shifting do you guys think I need to do before we get to the valley?"

Abeke looked at the map. "We're probably somewhere in this area," she said, running her finger over a wide swath of what looked like empty space. "Which means we have a few more hours to go before we reach the mountain range."

"It'll probably be dark once we're there." Conor leaned over to peer up at the small ray of sunlight coming in through the airhole. "We could start hiking over the mountains with less chance of being spotted."

"I can help guide you without even using the lantern," Xanthe said. "So I like the idea. But why not simply go under the mountains like we're doing now? Or is that something you think I shouldn't know either?"

Meilin didn't like Xanthe's tone. Sure, she had helped them before and was risking a lot now, but if it came at the price of causing division among the Greencloaks, then they would have to continue on without her. "Xanthe, if you can't accept not knowing a few things, then maybe —"

"Moving solid rock is much harder than shifting dirt and sand," Rollan said, cutting Meilin off. "Plus, in the middle of a mountain, it's not like we can go up thirty feet or so and be aboveground." He glanced at Xanthe and widened his eyes. "And having you guide us in the dark again will be very helpful ... especially since we have to go to that valley of death place."

"That reminds me of something I once heard ... " Abeke stared at the ground, where she was mindlessly making small swirls in the loose dirt with her forefinger. "What was it?"

“Something about the valley of death?” Conor rolled his head from side to side, trying to crack his neck. “Maybe you heard about it in your village?”

“Maybe,” Abeke said, but she was lost in her own memories.

“Well, if Rollan’s feeling rested”—Meilin put her canteen back in her bag—“then I think we should start moving again. We still have a ways to go.”

“Better enter ... valley of death ... who can see,” Abeke mumbled. She paused, then slapped her leg. “That’s it!”

“Huh?” Rollan glanced over at her. “What did you say?”

“It’s something the Rain Dancer in my village once said,” Abeke explained. “It’s an old Niloan proverb ... *Better to enter the valley of death with someone who can see, than blindly run through life never knowing who surrounds you.*”

“You think it has something to do with where we’re going?” Meilin asked.

Abeke shrugged. “No idea.”

Rollan pulled out the Heart of the Land, which hung under his shirt. “Sounds like it’s a warning about not being alone.”

“Really?” Conor took Rollan’s bag and slipped it over his shoulder. “How do you figure?”

“Well, I think it’s just saying that it’s better to die with someone who knows the real you than go through life never letting anyone get close.” Rollan paused. Everyone was staring at him with slightly surprised looks.

“What? I can’t be deep? I’ve read poetry before, if that surprises you.” Rollan gave a sheepish smile. “Or I could be completely wrong about the whole thing.”

“What you said does make sense.” Meilin was already on her hands and knees, ready to start crawling again. “Goes along with our belief that united Greencloaks are the best for Erdas.”

“Xanthe, which way do we go?” Anka asked from behind Meilin.

“Open the tunnel that way.” She pointed to a spot behind Rollan. “It’ll keep us headed east.”

The group continued crawling through Rollan’s tunnel for several more hours, taking small breaks every once in a while, until they bumped into a dead end where the compacted dirt changed to solid rock. At that

point, Rollan took a deep breath and used the amulet to create a crack in the hard dirt above them, widening it to form a gaping hole.

Meilin, standing with the others, bent her head back and took in the starry sky. They were still about twenty feet down. “So, any suggestions on how to get up there?”

“Only one way,” Abeke said. “Together. The lightest person climbs on top of the others and then drops a rope. Normally, that would be me, but now I think it’s Anka.” Abeke turned around, searching for the camouflaged Greencloak. “Don’t you think, Anka? Anka? Anka, where are you?”

“I’m right here,” she answered. “And yes, make a pyramid and I’ll climb on top.”

“Before we do anything, let me have Essix check the area,” Rollan said as he released the gyrfalcon, who promptly took to the sky.

Meilin stared at Rollan. He had decided to squat down and was rubbing his temples. Under the layer of dirt that they all had covering them, his face looked flushed, and there was something about how his shoulders were drooping. “You’re looking a little ... *off*.”

Rollan shook out his arms. “I’m fine. It just feels like that one time when I binged on a bag of sugar candies and my body crashed afterward. Maybe wielding all that power for hours without stopping does something similar.”

From high above, Essix squawked, giving the all clear to continue.

“That’s our cue.” Rollan took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Let’s do this. Conor and I can form the base.” Rollan motioned for Conor to get closer. “Meilin and Xanthe can climb on top and Anka can scale all of us to get to the top.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Abeke asked.

“I’m a little tired ... but when has that stopped any of us?” Rollan replied with a grin.

“All right, then, if you’re sure.” Conor pulled out a rope from one of the bags and handed it to Anka. “Here you go.”

Anka took the rope, looping it over her head and right shoulder. As soon as the rope touched her, it began to blend into the shadows thrown by the lantern. “I’m ready.”

A few minutes later each of them had made their way out of the pit and were standing under the expansive night sky and full moon. They all

stretched and filled their lungs with the cool air that drifted down the mountainside.

Loosening her long braid, Meilin shook out some of the dirt and pebbles stuck in her hair. It felt good after being confined underground all day, but what she really longed for was a bath. That was a luxury she rarely got to enjoy anymore. Not that she would ever trade her life as a Greencloak for her prior life in the palace. That lifestyle was best suited for other girls ... like Princess Song.

Meilin felt a slight pain in her chest. She hadn't thought of the princess in a while, but the two girls had much in common. Besides having grown up in Zhongese palaces, they'd both seen their fathers die violently. It was something Meilin could never forget, and she wouldn't wish it on anyone. And not only had she and Princess Song witnessed those horrendous deaths, they'd both been forced to take charge of circumstances not of their own choosing. Meilin wondered if, after everything was over and the Greencloaks cleared their name, she and Princess Song would become friends. It felt like a distinct possibility.

"Why don't we make camp here? Give Rollan a break for a while," Anka said. "We could use the pit as a trap if any animals try to attack again."

"I just need five minutes and I'll be good to go," Rollan said, having sat down and rested his head on his knees. "We have a lot of ground to cover."

Conor and Abeke took the opportunity of finally being aboveground to release their spirit animals. Briggan and Uraza quickly took in their surroundings. Uraza first scratched the ground, then her nostrils flared. She stood motionless, having picked up the scent of something. Briggan, on the other hand, took one look around, decided that there was nothing of interest for him, and sat down to watch Uraza.

The leopard took two slow steps forward, paused, perked her ears, and then darted toward the mountain. She was on the hunt.

Conor laughed as Briggan jumped up and gave chase. "Looks like Briggan doesn't want to be left out of whatever Uraza is up to."

"Rrrr ... " Rollan let out a quiet snore. He had passed out while sitting on the ground.

"Poor guy," Anka muttered. "He's really tired."

"He looks uncomfortable." Meilin sat across from him and began rebraiding her hair. "This should help." She called out Jhi, who, upon

seeing how exhausted Rollan was, snuggled up against him and pulled him to her chest. Rollan didn't protest and simply sank into the bear.

Rollan's five minutes turned into twenty, then thirty.

Essix had returned and was perched on a nearby acacia tree, waiting for the group to continue.

"Why don't we split up for a while?" Abeke suggested. "Conor, Xanthe, and I can head up the mountain and find a place to make camp during daylight hours. A cave or something. That way Xanthe won't have to deal with the sun. Essix can show you where we are whenever Rollan recovers."

Meilin nodded, not wanting to risk waking Rollan up. She didn't like seeing him like this. It reminded her of when he became ill with the Sunset Death when they were fighting the Devourer. So much had happened since that time ... in the world and between her and Rollan.

"I think that's a good idea," Anka whispered. "We'll meet up with you in a few hours. Just make sure you don't go too far without us."

Conor nodded. He and the others picked up their bags to begin the hike up the mountain. Meilin watched them leave for as long as she was able to, until the darkness of the savannah swallowed her friends from sight.

She pulled the sides of her cloak tighter across her chest. There was a chill in the air. She felt fidgety not having anything to do, so she decided to take an inventory of everything in her bag. Suddenly, she felt Jhi's eyes on her.

"What?" she asked. The panda still had Rollan's head resting on top of her belly.

Jhi blinked but didn't move.

"I just don't like sitting around doing nothing," Meilin explained, repacking the medical supplies, fruit, jerky, and a small tin pot for cooking. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere without him. I know he needs to rest."

She sighed, leaning back on her elbows. They all needed to be at full strength if they were going to survive whatever waited for them in the valley of death.

"Anka?" Meilin listened carefully, trying to pinpoint her location. "Anka, you want to train a little more?"

"I think I'm done for the day," Anka replied, her voice coming from a few feet away. "It's too dark and I'm tired from all the crawling."

Meilin strained her eyes to see Anka, but the elder Greencloak completely blended into the night.

“You know that I have no idea where you are right now. Between the clouds covering the moon and your camouflage ability ... it’s like I’m talking into a void.”

There was a brief flash of light, then Meilin could see Anka’s silhouette leaning against her bag. Anka had returned Toey to his passive state as a tattoo on her wrist.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s nice to somewhat see who I’m talking to.” Meilin wasn’t usually one to share her feelings, but over the course of their journey, she’d grown closer to Anka. It felt good to have someone a little older around, especially someone from Zhong. It felt as if she’d gained a big sister.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do after all this is over?” Meilin asked her.

“You mean, when we complete the mission?” Anka paused, thinking about her answer. “I guess I’ll return to Zhong. Help in the recovery. Unless the Greencloaks need me elsewhere. What about you?”

“I’d like to go home to Jano Rion, even if only for a little while. Rollan and I were on the way there when Olvan called for us, and then all this happened.”

“You deserve the chance to go home,” Anka said. “You’re a legend over there.”

“I don’t know about the legend stuff.... I just want to see everyone.” Meilin sighed at the thought of the people who wouldn’t be there anymore. People like her father. “Speaking of seeing people,” Meilin said, hoping to change the subject. “Why do you keep yourself hidden most of the time?”

“I don’t know,” Anka answered. “Toey likes to be out and I don’t even think about it. It’s like if I’m breathing, my body automatically blends into the background. In fact, I have to concentrate if I want to be seen.”

“But doesn’t it bother you that people forget you’re around?”

Anka shrugged. “Not really. You’d be surprised at how much I get to see when people don’t remember I’m there. But the truth is that *everybody* conceals themselves, at least partly. Even from our friends. I’ll bet you do it, too, without really thinking about it. We skip details

that are unflattering or scary, or cloak ourselves in the customs of the region we're in. There are lots of ways to hide.... Mine is just the most noticeable.”

Meilin didn't have anything else to say. Perhaps Anka was right and she was being the most honest of them all. Meilin did keep some things hidden. Feelings and fears that she didn't even like admitting to herself. And not just silly things like being afraid of spiders: also the real worries, like being afraid to get hurt. She'd believed that a true warrior wouldn't allow herself to be vulnerable, and that's why she always kept her emotions in check.

But was love really a weakness, or was it a strength?

Meilin wasn't always sure.



VALLEY OF DEATH

CONOR STUMBLED ON THE UNEVEN GROUND AND FELL onto his right knee. He quickly popped back up as if nothing had happened, grateful that the night shrouded his clumsiness. For the last few hours, he'd been trying to keep up with Xanthe, but these mountains were more like the ones in western Amaya, where they'd first encountered Arax, than the rolling hills near his home in Eura.

"Uraza, over there!" Abeke pointed to something a few yards away.

Briggan hurdled over a rock to beat the leopard to whatever animal they'd both been chasing.

"Looks like Briggan may have won," Conor said, getting close enough to see the wolf sticking his snout into a small, rocky opening.

"Careful ... hyraxes are tricky," Abeke warned as Briggan tried pawing his way into the hole.

"Hyrax?" Conor repeated. "I thought it was a rabbit."

"It sort of looks like a rabbit," Abeke explained. "Except it has no tail and round ears. People call them rock rabbits because—"

"Look out, Briggan!" Xanthe called out, just as the hyrax darted between Briggan's legs and right by Uraza's snapping jaws.

The chase was on again, with Uraza and Briggan taking off after their small prey.

"Glad someone's having fun out here," Conor remarked, rubbing his knee. "Hope you're about to tell us that the path gets a whole lot smoother up ahead."

“Um, not quite,” Xanthe said. “We’re going to have to double back. It’s narrow and steep, and it looks like the path itself has fallen away. We’re going to have to find another way around.”

“But going around the base of these mountains might add an extra day or two.” Conor knew they’d taken the only visible path over the mountain. “We’ve bought some time with the hyena thing, but the Oathbound will keep looking for us. We can’t waste so much time out in the open.”

Abeke placed a hand on Uraza, who was now holding the dead hyrax in her mouth. “It’s not like we have a choice.”

“Well, we actually do. Follow me.” Xanthe backtracked down the path, stopped next to a large pile of rocks, and tried pushing a large boulder out of the way. “Conor, help me with this.”

Conor put his shoulder into it and the boulder shifted a few feet to reveal the opening to a dark cave. “You want to make camp in there?” He peered over some large rocks that still blocked the bottom of the entrance. He couldn’t see a thing inside.

“Yes.” Xanthe climbed over the rocks and went inside. “But more importantly, I’m thinking we can go through the mountain instead of going around it.”

“How far back do you think this thing goes?” Abeke motioned for Uraza to stay outside while she joined Xanthe.

“Pretty far, from the vibrations I get.” Xanthe’s voice echoed against the walls. “But we can always have Rollan open it up whenever it dead-ends.”

Conor entered and quickly lit a match. In the flickering light he could see that the cave extended into tunnels. Abeke was still close to the entrance, but he could see Xanthe’s white hair as she explored the far side.

“Ow!” Conor flicked the match to the ground as the flame burned his fingertips. The cave immediately went black again, except for the fading red glow of the matchstick that now lay at Conor’s feet.

“I don’t think moving mountains is a good idea.” Conor headed back outside where it wasn’t quite as dark. “The Heart of the Land could cause a cave-in. We’d be trapped.”

“But we might face a bigger risk out there with the hyenas and the Oathbound,” Xanthe countered. “And this cave could stretch deep into the mountain. We can make camp in here while I go check it out.”

Uraza jumped inside, followed by Briggan. They both seemed to have made their own decisions to stay inside for the remainder of the night.

“Traitor,” Conor grumbled.

“Well, if there really is a field of skulls up ahead,” Abeke mused, “then hopefully whatever separated the skulls from their bodies won’t expect us to come through the mountain.” Abeke leaned over the group of rocks that formed a barrier to the cave entrance. She stared at the sky. “Any sort of trap would be set for those who come over or around it.”

“I guess, but let’s see what the others think before we decide,” Conor suggested. He took a seat near the cave entrance, where he could still feel the night air.

A bird screeched somewhere outside.

Conor sat a little straighter, his hearing amplified because of Briggan. “That sounds like Essix.”

Abeke pointed to something in the night sky. “It is! She knows we’re here.”

Briggan stretched out next to Conor. “Well, I’m guessing she’ll bring the others here in the morning.” Conor rubbed the wolf’s belly.

Abeke took out a small blanket from her bag and laid it flat on the ground. Uraza quickly curled up at the bottom of it. “Ahem, I was going to lie there.” Abeke smiled. “Guess we’ll share.”

As Conor drifted off to sleep, he heard the leopard purr in agreement.



Dawn was already breaking when a voice pierced through Conor’s dream of running down the hillside toward his home in Eura.

“Wake up, sleepyheads!” Rollan commanded. His hands were on the rocks at the entrance of the cave as he climbed inside. Daylight streamed in from behind him. “Don’t you want to see that field full of skulls and drain the demon’s blood? Mwahaha!”

“Rollan, give them a minute.” Meilin swung her legs over the small barrier wall and walked into the cave.

Conor opened one eye, wishing he could have five more minutes of sleep. It had been a long time since he’d seen his family, and he liked having them pop up in his dreams.

“Someone has a ton of energy,” Xanthe remarked from deeper in the cave.

“You aren’t kidding,” Anka grumbled, clearly visible to everyone. Conor assumed she’d placed Toey in passive state. Perhaps even Anka liked to be seen once in a while.

“I think Jhi’s influence made Rollan a little *too* well rested,” Meilin said. “He’s been chirping like this the whole walk here.” Meilin pulled out her canteen and took a small sip of water. “Mental note for next time.”

“Funny.” Rollan stayed outside the cave and looked up at the mountain. “Did you notice that the path ends up ahead? Looks like we’ll have to find a different way to get to the face in the mountain.”

“Yeah, about that.” Conor rubbed the back of his stiff neck. “Xanthe had an idea, but I’m not sure if—”

“Why don’t we just tell them and let them decide for themselves.” Xanthe drew closer, wearing Abeke’s cloak to shield her from the soft morning sun.

“What’s the idea?” Meilin glanced from Abeke to Conor, then back to Abeke.

“We were thinking that going around will probably take a couple of days,” Abeke explained. “And if there are some sort of traps that gave the valley of death its name, they’d probably be on the typical paths around or over the mountains.”

“So Xanthe found a different way?” Meilin looked over at Xanthe for more information.

“Well, last night I explored the cave a bit.” She motioned behind her where one of the tunnels grew dark. “And that one extends deep into the center of the mountain.”

“Uh-huh.” Meilin waited for more, but Xanthe didn’t say anything else. “But it ends, right? So we can’t go through.”

“Oh, wait. I get it.” Rollan’s expression changed. He snapped his fingers. “You want me to get us through the rest of it.”

“I already explained that we’ve faced a similar situation before,” Conor stated. “And we decided we couldn’t use it because it was too risky. And nothing has changed.”

“But it has changed. It was different with Worthy.” Abeke stroked Uraza, who remained curled up on the blanket. “The cave was completely unstable back then. Any movement could’ve caused the whole thing to collapse. That’s not the case here. And Rollan’s gotten much better at using the bond token, too.”

“I *am* pretty good at using it.” Rollan ran his hand along the inside wall of the cave. “But I wouldn’t be able to make a tunnel like I did when we were underground. There I only had to shift the dirt and sand.” He knocked on the stone. “This is too solid.”

“So that’s that.” Abeke stood up, pushed Uraza off, and shook out the blanket. “We go around and brace ourselves for whatever’s out there.”

Rollan pulled out a loose stone from the wall. “But maybe I can make enough cracks where we can take out the rocks and make our own tunnel.”

“Rollan.” Meilin pulled him aside. “Do you even know how to do that? This would probably be a lot harder than moving dirt, and if you mess up—”

“I won’t mess up.” He sidestepped Meilin to speak directly to Xanthe. “Do you know how far we’d have to go?”

“I tried to get a feel of the cave’s vibrations like in Sadre. It’s not the same because this is aboveground, but I think I could direct you to where there’s another cave that comes in from the other side of the mountain. There’s about ten feet or so of solid rock between them, though.”

“So I’d have to make enough cracks where we can create a tunnel between the two caves.” Rollan pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah, I think I can do that ... but I should practice first.” He pulled out the Heart of the Land from under his shirt and lifted the chain over his head. He clutched the amulet in his hand and pushed against the cave wall. A rumbling and creaking noise filled the air.

“Whoa!” Meilin shouted. “Stop!”

Rollan yanked his fist away from the wall. Cracks resembling a spiderweb had already formed, boring into the stone. He dug his fingertips around one of the larger splintered pieces of rock and jostled it back and forth. Then he pulled it out, leaving behind a hole several inches deep.

“Hey, this might actually work!” Conor exclaimed.

“You doubted me?” Rollan smirked.

“Didn’t doubt *you*,” Conor explained. “I doubted the mountain.”

“Uraza,” Abeke called to the leopard. “I think it’ll be easier if you make the journey in passive state.”

Conor glanced over at Briggan. “You too, boy.”

Both animals stepped forward and disappeared, emerging as tattoos on their respective partners.

“I’m not even going to bother asking Essix,” Rollan said. “She’ll either fly around and find us, or she’ll follow us through the tunnel.”

“So let’s get started,” Xanthe said, ready to lead the way. “You’ll have to light the lantern. It gets very dark in there.”

The group gathered their things and walked into the center of the mountain, following Xanthe through several twists and turns. Eventually, they reached the dead end Xanthe had mentioned.

“All right, then.... Here we go.” Rollan struck the cave wall with the side of his fist while clutching the Heart of the Land.

The mountain rumbled and groaned with every hit as cracks splintered the wall. Piece by piece, bit by bit, the group took chunks out of the mountain. It was slow and tedious work that, after several hours, left many of their fingers bleeding.

“We’re through!” Abeke yelled when a piece of cave wall fell back into the opening on the other side.

Conor and Meilin pushed the remaining rocks and boulders until they could all crawl through the hole. A long, winding tunnel led them to an opening where daylight streamed in. The five Greencloaks and Xanthe stood side by side, looking out at a mountain on the opposite side of the green valley down below.

“There it is.” Xanthe pointed to a part of the mountain that looked like a man’s profile. “The face in the mountain that Sodu described seeing and that Tembo wrote about.”

It was unmistakable. The wind had chiseled out the curve of his forehead, the sunken area of his eyes, the steep angle of his nose, and a very prominent chin.

Conor gazed at the valley below, filled with bushes and a few acacia trees. There was a small stream running down the center of it. It was all very peaceful. Nothing like the barren wasteland he had imagined. “And is that supposed to be the valley of death?” he muttered.

“Doesn’t quite live up to its name, huh?” Abeke replied.

“Meh, you never know.” Rollan grabbed a small rock and threw it as far as he could. “It could be a trap to lull you into thinking nothing is wrong and then ... Whack! Your head is chopped off.”

“I can’t see much right now.” Xanthe was shielding her eyes, the hood of Abeke’s cloak pulled low so it nearly covered her nose. “Do any of you see skulls?”

“No,” Meilin answered. “But maybe it’s been so long that they’re all buried by now.”

Conor looked back at Xanthe. She had stepped farther inside the cave to avoid the direct midday sun. Even with Abeke’s cloak as protection, she wouldn’t be able to hike in the daytime for too long. “Maybe we should wait until it gets dark. Head out then.”

“No, you can’t waste any time,” Xanthe answered without hesitation. “I’ll only be slowing you down from this point on. You have to go without me.”

“But we can’t leave you here.” Abeke’s voice was full of concern. “Nilo can be a dangerous place, especially if you’re alone. You have the hyenas and other animals out here. Never mind the Oathbound.”

“I’m a warrior... I can take care of myself,” Xanthe answered, taking another step back. “And I really should go back to see Takoda. Let him know that I’m safe.” She retreated even farther into the dark cave. “I’ll travel at night and I’ll be fine. But you need to go finish your mission. My job was to get you to this point.”

Meilin gave Xanthe a small nod of gratitude. “Thank you for helping us.”

Abeke wasn’t convinced. “But maybe Xanthe can wait and—”

“Good luck, my friends.” Xanthe waved to them. “I hope our paths cross again soon.” She turned and ran back into the cave.

“Guess she didn’t want to discuss it anymore,” Anka said, calling out Toey, who scampered up her cloak. Within seconds Anka’s form faded from view as her skin and clothes blended against the side of the mountain.

“Xanthe understands that this is important.” Meilin pointed to a way down toward the valley. “Now, let’s stay alert for any traps.”

Rollan and Anka followed Meilin, while Conor stayed behind with Abeke for a moment.

“I had the vision again,” he whispered. “Last night.”

“The one with the big tidal wave?”

Conor nodded. “I’m watching from somewhere up high, and I can see the ocean pull away just before the wave comes barreling toward me. I just wish I knew more about what it means or the circumstances around it.”

“You can’t force that kind of thing.” Abeke touched his arm. “You have to be patient.”

Conor gave her a smile. “You sound like Master Naveb.”

“He definitely had some insight into each of us.” Abeke paused. “Well, most of us. He didn’t have much to say about Anka.”

“He may not have remembered that she was there. She’s pretty good at making people forget about her.”

“ABEKE! CONOR!” Meilin shouted. She had reached the valley floor and was holding her sword high above her head.

Conor and Abeke sprinted down the mountain, calling out Briggan and Uraza as they ran. As both animals appeared, neither one hesitated. Each took a fraction of a second to assess the situation and race to whatever had confronted the others down below.

In his mind, Conor braced himself for what he might find. He imagined the ground covered with half-rotten skulls and something that might put his own head in jeopardy. A trap, a ferocious animal, a vicious attacker, or something completely indescribable. But he was not prepared for what he saw as he drew closer to the valley.

It was Rollan. He was sitting in the middle of the field ... laughing hysterically.

Uraza and Briggan were pacing around all the bushes, looking as confused as Conor felt.

“What are you doing?” Abeke spun around, trying to understand what was so funny.

“The field of skulls.” Rollan cupped his hand under the stem of one of the large plants. “Look!”

Conor drew closer and noticed the dried seedpods that clung to the stem. Each one looked like a small brown skull. The entire valley was full of them.

Meilin swung her sword against another plant, knocking several of the seedpods into the air. “This is what we were so worried about.” She spun around, taking a swipe at another bush. “A bunch of dried-up plant parts.”

“Snapdragons,” Abeke confirmed. “It didn’t even occur to me. When the flowers die and fall away, what’s left behind are the seedpods that look like skulls.”

“And here I was thinking that there would be traps trying to chop our heads off.” Rollan stood and shook the dirt off his pants. “Makes me think that there may not be a demon to kill, either.”

Uraza and Briggan had relaxed and were now simply inspecting the area.

Conor looked around for something that might resemble a demon. All he could see were more of the snapdragon plants and, on the other side of the valley, the small mountain with the face jutting out.

“Those trees.” Abeke trekked through the snapdragon plants, mesmerized by something. Conor, Meilin, Rollan, and Anka all followed as she crossed the valley and got to the foot of the opposite mountain. “Up there. There’s a cluster of them on that ridge.”

“You think it has something to do with demons?” Conor tilted his head as if trying to see them from a different angle.

“They *are* the demons.” Abeke smiled. “Demon trees that bleed red sap.”

“So that’s the blood we have to drain?” Rollan looked relieved. “Plain old tree sap? I’m really liking this part of the mission. Tembo had a good sense of humor.”

“Although it looks like we might have to do some rock climbing to get up there.” Abeke stared at the sheer cliff.

“Rollan and I will do it,” Meilin said. She slipped off her bag and dug around inside it.

“Um, it might be nice if you asked before volunteering me.” Rollan pointed to Conor’s bag. “And if you’re looking for the ropes, they’re over there.”

“I can go with you, Meilin,” Abeke offered. “It shouldn’t be hard to get the sap.... Just nick the tree and attach one of our canteens to collect it. It might take a while, though. We’ll probably have to stay up there until tomorrow, because the sap can drip pretty slowly.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t go,” Rollan clarified. “Just that I’d like to be asked, not told. And it does make more sense for me and Meilin to go up.”

Conor and Abeke exchanged a quick glance and smiled. They both knew that Rollan liked the idea of spending some time alone with Meilin.

“What?” Rollan protested. “It’s better if the two people going up are tied together, and a counterbalance works best if both people are similar in weight ... in case either one falls, the other will be able to support them. Remember what happened when we were scaling the walls to get

the Wildcat's Claw? That's why I'm saying it. Meilin and I are closer in size."

"Riiight," Conor said in mock deference. "It's just science."

Rollan had a broad smile on his face as he glanced at Meilin. "Exactly."



SLINGSHOT

SCALING MOUNTAINS WAS NOT ONE OF ROLLAN'S FAVORITE things to do, but it wasn't the worst, either. It ranked somewhere between eating seal fat and swimming in the ocean at night. But he did like spending time with Meilin. That made the climb worthwhile.

"Watch your step over here." Rollan inched his way along a long, narrow foothold where only the tips of his toes fit. "Putting another anchor in." He lodged the metal anchor into a crack in the mountain and slipped the rope that connected the two of them through it. This was much safer than when they had used vines to get to the Wildcat's Claw.

"All right!" Meilin called out. She was taking out the anchors every time she got to one so they could reuse them later on. Eventually she would collect all seven and either take over the lead or hand them back to Rollan.

They were about halfway to the ridge and making decent time. Up above them, Rollan could see plenty of handholds and a couple of narrow ledges where they'd be able to stop, rest, and catch their breaths before continuing to climb.

"How about I go up through here?" Rollan turned to look over his shoulder at Meilin. "Meilin?"

He followed the rope and saw Meilin was already higher than he was, scaling up the mountain. "This way is better," she shouted down. "There are more crevices for the anchors over here. Shift back."

Rollan was about to argue that *he* was supposed to be leading, but it was pointless. Meilin was already putting in the second anchor. It would be more dangerous to have her come back down.

He took a careful step sideways along the tiny ledge.

No, he was definitely going to say something. They were a team. Decisions needed to be made together. Meilin had a habit of forgetting that.

“Hey, Meilin, you can’t just take off and expect me to follow. We’re supposed to be a unit.” A rock bounced off the mountain from above, narrowly missing him as it came tumbling down.

“Yeah, but this way up was better,” she insisted.

Rollan plucked off an anchor and continued along the ledge, his frustration rising with every backtracking step he took. “Doesn’t matter. It’s not only you up here. You aren’t back in Zhong giving orders like some sort of Imperial Guard.”

Meilin stopped climbing and looked back at Rollan. “That’s not fair. You know I’m not like that.” Another rock tumbled from above. “Plus, I’ve been trying—”

A flurry of rocks the size of Rollan’s fist smashed against the mountainside, interrupting Meilin. But this wasn’t a rockslide from above. No, these rocks were being aimed at them from below.

Rollan looked down and saw several people jumping out from beneath the snapdragon bushes ... slingshots in their hands. They weren’t wearing the black that the Oathbound normally wore, but that didn’t make them any less dangerous.

Farther back, Abeke, Conor, and their spirit animals charged across the field to do battle with the slingshot-wielding menaces. He and Meilin needed to get down there to help.

“ROLLAN!” Meilin yelled as the rocks stopped. She was pointing to a ledge high above them.

A flurry of arrows whizzed by Rollan’s head, headed toward the valley.

Rollan looked up at the ridge. Several people dressed in loose-fitting, sand-colored clothing stood on the edge, with bows aimed at the valley below. Rollan followed the arrows’ path and saw them land right in front of his friends. Conor and Abeke split apart, scrambling to find cover.

Essix swooped down from the sky and attacked one of the men. The archer swung wildly with his bow, using it like a bludgeon to fight her

off. Rollan could hear the man scream as Essix raked her sharp talons across his face.

“SURRENDER!” a voice shouted down at them. “Do not move or we won’t miss next time.”

“Rollan, we have to do something!” Meilin started to climb faster, ignoring the warning. “They have the advantage up there.”

“Hold on tight!” Rollan took out the Heart of the Land. He thought if he could focus all his energy on hitting the mountain, he could cause a tremor. Enough to shake the trees and maybe knock a few of the archers off the ledge. “Here it goes.”

Just then another hail of stones flew at them. The slingers were back, and this time they were hitting their marks. Rollan’s calf burned, and he hissed as a rock struck the back of his leg.

Another rock pegged him in the back, knocking the air from his lungs.

He glanced up at Meilin just in time to see a large rock hit the back of her head.

“MEILIN!” Rollan’s voice echoed through the valley down below, but he couldn’t do anything as her hands dropped to her sides, letting go of the handholds. Rollan saw her dark hair drape down her back as her body arched and peeled away from the mountain. She tumbled backward, knocking out two of the anchors as she sailed past Rollan on her way down.

Rollan braced himself. Only his counterweight would save Meilin from crashing against the rocks below. The rope’s slack disappeared as it snapped tight against his chest and thrust him against the mountain, pulling him up higher as Meilin dropped several more feet. Then everything stopped. The third and fourth anchors held tight and Rollan regained his footing ... but on the other end of the rope Meilin’s limp body dangled in midair.

An arrow flew overhead, this time headed toward the ridge, striking one of the attackers. Abeke was trying to give them cover, but there was no place for them to hide ... nowhere to go. All Rollan knew was that he had to help Meilin. She couldn’t hang like that for long.

Rollan grasped the Heart of the Land as tightly as he could and pushed against the mountain with all his might. He tried focusing all his thoughts and energy into moving the mountain. If he could create a ledge just below Meilin, he could then lower her onto it by giving the rope

some slack. But he didn't even know if it was possible to force a piece of the mountain to jut out.

He had to try. Meilin's life depended on it.

Rollan concentrated, ignoring everything else in the world.

The mountain began to shake. He could hear shouting from their attackers, mixed in with the thundering rumble of rocks cascading from different areas.

He didn't care. He was going to save Meilin.

"ARGHH!" he grunted as all his energy poured out of himself and into the amulet.

Rollan didn't even realize that the fighting had stopped. He didn't know that there were no more rocks being hurled at them, no more arrows flying back and forth. His adrenaline was flowing and he was solely focused on Meilin. He could feel the weight of her body pulling on the rope.

The mountain rumbled and groaned as if in pain. Still, Rollan forced it to shift. He had never tapped into so much of the amulet's energy. Inch by inch, a narrow ledge unfolded, forming a few feet beneath Meilin.

Once it was about three feet wide, he stopped to catch his breath.

"What kind of power do you have over our mountain?" a gruff voice called out.

Rollan ignored it. He slowly climbed up, allowing the rope to slide through the remaining anchors, which in turn allowed Meilin to gently fall onto the newly formed ledge.

"Answer us!" the voice demanded, but there was no show of force to back up the words. The arrows and rocks had ceased.

"I have to check on my friend!" Rollan shouted. He untied the rope around his chest and quickly scaled down to where Meilin lay.

"Meilin," he whispered, crouching down beside her. He lifted her head and his fingers came away bloody. "Come on, Meilin. Open your eyes," he said. "We need Jhi. She can help you. You have to call her out."

Meilin's body remained limp in his arms.

"Your falcon!" a much deeper voice shouted from above. "Call it back into passive state or we will finish what we started."

For the first time since Meilin had been hit, Rollan took a good look at his surroundings.

The sun was beginning to set over the western mountains. He could hear Essix squawking. Above Rollan were warriors with arrows pointed directly at him and Meilin. Down below in the valley, Abeke and Conor were sitting among the snapdragon bushes with their hands over their heads, another group of warriors surrounding them. Uraza and Briggan were nowhere in sight. Rollan assumed that they must have been forced back into their passive states as well.

“Call off the falcon!” the voice yelled again, sounding a little more desperate.

Rollan imagined that Essix was fighting some of the warriors ... and likely winning.

An arrow hit the ground, narrowly missing Meilin by a few inches. “Get the falcon out of here or the next one won’t miss!”

“Essix! ESSIX!” Rollan wobbled as he stood up, a sudden wave of exhaustion hitting him. “Please,” Rollan begged, pulling open his shirt, hoping the falcon realized that he had to do this to help Meilin. “Come!”

Essix flew away from the ridge and swooped past Rollan. Their eyes connected, and Rollan knew that the falcon understood the gravity of the situation.

A brief flash and the falcon tattoo appeared over Rollan’s heart.

“She’s gone,” Rollan shouted. “What do you want from us?”

There was silence. Rollan gazed over at Meilin again. He had never thought of her as fragile, but that’s exactly how she looked. He would do anything to protect her.

“I am Jehan, leader of the Dasat,” a strong, feminine voice called down. “We saw what you did. How do you hold such power over this mountain?”

There was no way Rollan was going to tell her about the Heart of the Land. “It doesn’t matter, but I can do much worse if you don’t leave us alone.” Rollan hoped this might be enough to frighten their attackers because, truth be told, he was far too weak to use the bond token again.

“Your friend is hurt... We can help her,” Jehan offered.

“You are the ones who hurt her!” Rollan countered.

Three long ropes tumbled down the mountainside toward the ledge. Rollan knew there was nowhere for them to go. And even if there were, neither he nor Meilin were in any shape to move.

“Climb up!” Jehan commanded. “That’s an order.”

Rollan was sitting next to Meilin once again, cradling her head. His own body was spent. Moving the mountain had drained him of all his energy. "I can't. I'm too weak." His voice shook as he spoke. "And I'm not leaving her here."

"Tie the rope around your waist and we will pull you up," Jehan offered. "Once we talk, if I'm satisfied by your answers, then I'll send a rescue team for your friend. It's the only way to save her."

Rollan didn't like the idea, but he knew there was no other way. Meilin needed to get off this mountain. She needed help. Her head had stopped bleeding, but she wasn't waking up.

He bent over and gave Meilin a kiss on the forehead. "I'm sorry," he said softly in her ear. "I hope I'm doing the right thing." He placed her head gently on the ground, tied the rope around his waist, and gave it a tug. "All right!" Rollan yelled. "Pull me up. Just get her rescue ready."



THE HUNT

ABEKE COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT AFTER EVERYTHING they'd been through, including epic wars with the Devourer and the Wurm, the Dasat tribe had caught them completely unaware. Even Uraza hadn't spotted them until it was too late.

"Look! Here come your friends." Khai, one of the guards, pointed toward a group carrying torches down the mountain. Even though it was dark, the light from the torches revealed an exhausted Rollan using two people as support as he walked with his head hung low. Behind him, several of the Dasat carried a wooden stretcher with Meilin strapped on top. "We'll see what they have to say."

"They'll tell you the truth, just as I have." Abeke tried wiggling the ropes that held her hands behind her back. After being captured, they had all been brought to the small Dasat camp on the other side of the mountain. "We only needed to get a bit of sap from the tree, and then we would have been on our way."

Khai shook his head. "Greencloaks never want one thing. They always demand more."

"But there was no reason to attack us," Conor argued, sitting on one of the many colorful rugs strewn around the camp. He was tied together with Anka, back to back. "We could have explained what we were doing. We meant no harm."

"A Dasat hunter captures their prey first, then decides what to do with it," Khai replied, bending down to get closer to Conor. "That's why

I cornered you and your wolf in the valley. But in this case, I won't be the one to decide what to do with you ... that'll be Jehan's decision."

"Who's Jehan?" Abeke asked.

"I am." A girl not much older than the Greencloaks motioned for the others to take Meilin to one of the tents. She wore a long, golden-brown scarf over her head and had sun-kissed skin and dark hair that peeked out from the edge of the scarf. "I'm the leader of the Dasat. This is our territory. No one enters without our permission. Your friend's injuries are the unfortunate consequence of her refusal to follow instructions."

"Jehan, we meant no harm," Abeke insisted. "We were simply—"

"Searching for the edge of the land, once you'd stolen the sap of the demon blood tree, correct?" Jehan smiled as Abeke's eyebrows scrunched together. "Don't be so surprised. Your friend Rollan was most informative ... once he was given the right incentive."

A honey badger scurried between the guards, causing them to jump aside and give it a wide berth. Abeke knew that these animals were among the most fearless hunters in Nilo, taking on even lions many times their size. The honey badger wasn't big. In fact it looked similar to a skunk, with a white stripe down its weasel-like body. But its sharp claws and bad attitude made it a ferocious fighter. No one wanted to mess with one of these animals.

The honey badger circled Anka and Conor, pausing briefly to give a guttural hiss and bare its teeth at them.

"Livora," Jehan reprimanded the animal. The honey badger glanced back, thought better of trying to pick a fight, and trotted over to stand next to Jehan.

Abeke realized that Jehan was Marked, and that the honey badger was her spirit animal. It made sense. Abeke could see that Jehan had the respect of much older and stronger members of her group. She was probably as smart and ferocious as Livora.

"You said you would help her." Rollan glanced back at the tent where Meilin had been carried. "You'll keep your word, right?"

"Of course." Jehan unsheathed a long, sharp knife that she carried at her waist. "But you still haven't truly explained how that ledge on the mountain moved." She strolled over to Abeke and stood behind her.

"I did." Rollan gave Abeke a quick glance. "It's from my spirit animal bond. A power that comes from within me.... Only I can tap into it ... no one else."

So Rollan wasn't giving away *all* their secrets. Only what was necessary to help Meilin. He hadn't told them about the Heart of the Land or the fact that anyone could use it.

"So you say." Jehan raised the knife above Abeke's head.

"NO!" Conor yelled as Jehan sliced the air with the knife, bringing it down with whiplike speed.

Abeke didn't see the blade sailing down. She only felt the parting of the air behind her back, and then her hands were free. Jehan hadn't hurt her. Instead, she'd cut the ropes around her wrists.

"No reason to have a fellow Niloan tied up." Jehan put the knife back in the leather holster. "The Dasat are an honorable people."

Abeke rubbed her wrists. "What about the others?" She pointed to Anka and Conor.

Jehan chuckled. "We're honorable ... not stupid." She waved over one of the warriors who had shot at them with the slingshots. "Take the Niloan Greencloak to the injured girl in my tent. Once she gets better, we will escort them all back across the mountains from where they came."

"Wait." Rollan took a step forward. "I want to go with Meilin."

Jehan shook her head. "I'm sure you do, but it's not your decision."

"I know of the Dasat," Abeke said. "Your skills are legendary throughout Nilo. Growing up I would hear stories of your hunting abilities ... but no one in my village knew if you still existed."

"We most certainly exist," Khai scoffed. "Otherwise you wouldn't be our prisoners."

"Guests," Jehan corrected him. "They don't have to be prisoners, if they agree to leave the same way they came."

"But I wonder if all the stories are true," Abeke mused. She watched as the honey badger used her large claws to dig a burrow a few feet away. "The incredible hunts and contests that the Dasat were said to hold. Rumor had it that they never turned away from a challenge."

Conor seemed to guess what Abeke was thinking. "We've met plenty of exceptional hunters and warriors in our travels," he said. "Like the Tergesh in Zhong and the Ardu in Arctica."

"Ha!" Khai rolled his eyes. "As if they could hold a candle to any of the Dasat."

Abeke had hoped that Rollan would chime in—he was usually good at this sort of thing—but the boy kept his eyes on the tent where Meilin

was being treated. He wasn't paying attention to anything that was being said.

"Perhaps we should have a contest," Abeke suggested. "Some of the stories I heard claimed the Dasat were always eager to prove their skills."

"What do you have in mind?" Khai asked, his eyes sparkling at the thought of a challenge.

"Your best against our best," Conor said.

"No." Jehan quashed the idea. "We've already proven our skills in capturing you. Soon you'll leave and be grateful that we let you live to tell the tale. We're not here for games."

Livora popped her head up from the burrow, as if something had piqued her interest. The honey badger scampered over to a barrel and, rising up on her hind legs, clawed her way to the top.

"There's nothing to eat there," Jehan said to her spirit animal.

Livora jumped down and ran between Rollan's legs. The boy blinked, as if coming to. He turned his attention away from the tent and back to the group.

"What if there's an incentive for the winner?" Rollan asked.

Abeke smiled. Rollan had been listening after all.

"Go on." Jehan's shrewd eyes watched him.

"If your challenger wins"—Rollan paused to consider his words—"I'll show you how I moved the mountain."

"I thought you said it was your spirit animal bond?" Jehan questioned, her arms folded across her chest.

"Yes, but I can show you how to work together with *your* spirit animal." Rollan pointed to the honey badger, who was busily gnawing on a rock. "That's what Greencloaks do, after all. Perhaps you could discover your own power."

Jehan seemed to entertain the idea. "And if you win ... what is it that you want?"

"If we win ... " Abeke spoke slowly, carefully considering what she was going to say. "You simply let us cross to get the sap."

"And you tell no one that we were ever here," Anka added.

"Ah, yes." Jehan nodded. "Rollan spoke of these Oathbound who are chasing you." The girl paced back and forth. "We're not involved in your dealings with the Oathbound. We'll take no side in your battle, as neither is a proven friend of the Dasat."

“Jehan.” Khai slowly walked around Conor, evaluating him. “I know I can beat these Greencloaks. This one and his wolf tried to attack me earlier. I would enjoy battling him again.”

“And you swear that you’ll show me how you moved the mountain?” Jehan asked Rollan.

He nodded as several of the Dasat gathered around. Word had already spread that a challenge had been issued.

“Then I see no harm in having a hunting contest,” Jehan declared, turning to look at everyone. “Just as our old Dasat traditions dictate,” she announced. “We shall give this matter over to the twin sisters of Fate and Skill, who guide every hunter’s path. The first hunter to return with a significant kill will be declared the victor.” She spun back around. “Our most resourceful hunter, Khai, shall be our representative.”

The crowd cheered.

Jehan then looked at Rollan. “And who is your representative?”

“She is.” Rollan pointed to Abeke, who stepped forward to stand next to Khai. Abeke could sense it was a stark contrast; the hunter dwarfed her in height and width.

The Dasat began laughing, and she heard murmuring rise throughout the crowd.

Khai was not pleased. “This is who you choose?” He grabbed Abeke under her arms and lifted her as if she were a small child. “This isn’t a challenge ... it is an insult. And I will not—”

Abeke swung her leg, catching him unaware. As he lost his balance, the hunter dropped her, and she landed lightly on her hands and feet. She turned and gave Khai a strong kick in the stomach that sent him flying onto his back, then quickly pressed her foot against the base of his neck.

“You’re correct,” Abeke hissed, bending over to get close to his face. “It doesn’t seem like much of a challenge ... does it?”

Khai glared at her and batted away her leg.

“You going to let her do that to you, Khai?” someone called out.

“Khai, how’s the view from down there?” another voice laughed.

“Enough!” Jehan raised her hands and the crowd quickly grew silent. “We would all do well to remember that a hunter is not measured by his ... *or her* ... size.” She faced Abeke. “You will not use your spirit animal during the hunt. This is a test of your skill alone. Is that clear?”

Abeke wasn’t worried. She knew she could hold her own with the very best hunters. “Understood, but I will need my bow and arrows.”

“Of course.” Jehan motioned for one of the Dasat guards to get her things.

“What about Meilin?” Rollan asked, his voice laced with worry. “Someone needs to help her.”

“Agreed.” Jehan’s face seemed to soften as she studied Rollan. “Since the Niloan Greencloak will be gone, I think it’s best if you go to my tent and stay with your friend. The others will stay elsewhere.”

“Thank you,” Rollan said as the Dasat guard handed Abeke her bow and a quiver full of arrows, which she immediately inspected.

“And when does the hunt begin?” Anka asked.

Jehan lifted a single eyebrow and smiled. “It already has.”

“What?” Abeke spun around and noticed that Khai had disappeared into the crowd. He not only had the advantage of knowing the terrain, but now he had a head start.

“But that’s not fair,” Conor protested. “There was no warning.”

Jehan shrugged. “You can waste time arguing or you can begin the hunt.”

Rollan’s eyes met Abeke’s. She gave him a slow nod. She would do this for them. And for Meilin. Failure was not an option.



Crossing the valley, Abeke kept her eyes peeled for any type of movement. She hadn’t spotted any large game during the day, but there would certainly be nocturnal animals wandering the valley floor at night. She remembered seeing a watering hole as they were being brought to camp. That would be a good place to seek out game. The only problem would be if a predator turned the tables on her. This hunter had no interest in becoming the hunted.

The moonlit sky cast enough light for Abeke to see by. Every once in a while, she would hear a noise and pause, but she had yet to detect anything large enough to waste an arrow on. She contemplated shooting a very small warthog she spied hiding near a snapdragon bush, but feared that wouldn’t be enough. It didn’t seem like something the Dasat would consider *significant*.

She was approaching a clearing not far from the watering hole when she saw it. A lone gazelle stood placidly, foraging for its own bit of food. Abeke silently pulled out an arrow from her quiver and nocked it on her bow. She took aim and waited for the perfect shot.

The gazelle froze, sensing something was amiss.

Abeke held the arrow, watching the gazelle sniff the air.

The way the animal took in its surroundings reminded her of Uraza. Abeke's fingers trembled. It was like when she had been forced to shoot her beloved spirit animal. Abeke blinked, trying to cast out those thoughts and focus on the task at hand.

A perfectly aimed arrow flew through the night and struck the gazelle in the neck, killing it instantly.

For a moment, Abeke thought she had shot the animal, but then she noticed that her fingertips still held her own arrow.

"YES!" Khai ran past Abeke, toward the dead gazelle. "Your hesitation is my victory!" he called out.

Abeke couldn't believe it. He'd taken the kill from right under her nose. She wasn't used to being bested by anyone during a hunt. Now the Greencloaks were in serious trouble. Rollan would have to show Jehan how to use the Heart of the Land, and they would be no closer to finding Stormspeaker.

"Ha-ha!" Khai whooped it up as he tossed the gazelle over his shoulders. "And you didn't even sense me come up behind you! I'm still the king of the hunters!"

A chorus of laughter followed Khai's celebration. His eyes widened and he jolted to a stop, his body still.

Abeke knew all too well what was making that sound.

Hyenas.

Khai spun around, realizing too late that he was surrounded. Abeke thought he would toss the gazelle aside and make a run for it, but instead he pulled out his long knife. He was going to try to leave with his kill.

The hyenas pounced, attacking him from all sides. He slashed at the air, knocking a couple of them away before another one jumped on his back, snapping its jaws on the dead animal.

"Khai!" Abeke called out. "Let them have the gazelle! It's not worth it."

"Never!" he answered. A hyena bit down on Khai's leg and he cried out in pain. Khai grabbed the animal by the head and wrestled it off. "Go! This is not your fight!"

"It is now!" Abeke took aim and shot the hyena as Khai stabbed it along its flank. She called out Uraza with a burst of radiance, and the

Great Leopard immediately gave chase to several hyenas. “There are too many of them for one person!” she said, firing off two more arrows.

Khai spun around. He faced one particularly determined hyena that didn’t want to give up on its gazelle meal. “This is mine!” he shouted. “I will bring victory to my people or die trying!”

Abeke wasn’t sure if he was speaking to her or the hyena, but it didn’t matter. They were now both in the fight together.

Then, from somewhere behind her, Abeke heard a rustling sound as another hyena raced through the tall grass at full speed toward her. She nocked another arrow but didn’t have enough time to aim. Just as the hyena lunged at her, Uraza leaped through the air, grasping the animal with her powerful jaws. The two fell to the ground, rolling over each other, while Uraza quickly tore at its body. It wasn’t even a close match.

Abeke kept her bow and arrow ready, searching the area for any more attacks, but the night had grown still again.

All the hyenas had disappeared ... and so had Khai with his gazelle. Abeke had failed her friends.



INTRUDERS

MEILIN SLOWLY OPENED HER EYES. SHE ROLLED HER head to the side and saw Rollan sleeping next to her, his hand holding on to hers. They were both lying on soft mattresses placed on colorful rugs. There was a hint of daylight coming through the fabric of the large tent they were sleeping in.

“Rollan.” Her voice didn’t sound like her own. It was raspy and weak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Rollan.”

Rollan sat up with a start, pulling at a shackle that chained their ankles together. “You’re awake! You’re awake!” He hugged her, then pulled back to double-check that she was indeed alert. “I’m sorry for arguing with you. I didn’t mean any of it.”

Meilin touched the bandage that was wrapped around her head. She was confused. The last thing she remembered was climbing the mountain with Rollan and arguing about whether she was too bossy. “What happened?”

“You were knocked out for a while, but you will heal,” a voice declared from the opposite side of the tent. “Based on what Rollan’s told me, your spirit animal should help you far better than our herbs.”

Meilin watched as a very pretty girl walked confidently over to the tent’s opening. She pulled aside the fabric and called to someone outside. “Our guests are awake. Bring them some food and fresh water.”

Meilin was confused. Who was this person? How did she know Rollan? And if they were her guests, then why had she shackled Meilin’s

leg to Rollan's? Nothing made sense. "What's going on?" Meilin asked.

"Her name is Jehan," Rollan explained. "She's the leader of the Dasat. They protect these mountains ... as we have painfully discovered." He gave Jehan a sheepish grin and Jehan returned the smile.

Meilin pursed her lips. She wasn't sure what had happened while she was out, but she already knew that she didn't like this girl.

Jehan studied Meilin. "Rollan told me some very impressive stories about the Heroes of Erdas last night. Seems you are a formidable warrior." A honey badger scampered around the tent, climbing on top of several stacked rugs and then curling into a ball to sleep. "That's why we had to take certain precautions. We couldn't take the chance that you'd wake up during the night and try to escape."

Meilin tried to sit up, but everything seemed to spin and she fell back on her elbows. "So we're your prisoners." She didn't understand how things could have changed so much. "How long was I out?"

"About twelve hours," Jehan answered. "We tried making you as comfortable as possible ... under the circumstances." A guard poked his head into the tent, motioning for Jehan to come outside. "I'll be right back," she said.

"You got hit on the head pretty hard," Rollan said as soon as Jehan left. "You should have Jhi take a look at you. She'll help you feel better."

Meilin nodded, but glanced around the room. No one else was with them. "Where are the others?" she whispered, already trying to think of a means to escape.

"Conor and Anka are being guarded in another tent," Rollan answered. "You were brought here because you were in bad shape last night. I talked Jehan into letting me stay here, too."

"I'm sure it took a lot of convincing," Meilin muttered.

"Huh?" Rollan scrunched his eyebrows together. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." Meilin wasn't sure *what* she meant, or what she was feeling exactly. "How about Abeke? Is she free?"

"Sort of," he replied. "We challenged the Dasat to a hunting contest. If Abeke wins, then ... " Rollan stopped talking as Jehan whipped open the fabric covering the tent's entrance and stepped inside.

"You both need to stay here," she ordered, her face very stern.

"What's happened?" Rollan asked. "Something's changed."

Jehan didn't answer him. "Just do as I say and I'll be back soon. My guards will be here with your breakfast in a few minutes." She looked at the honey badger. "Livora, we need to go." She held out her hand and the honey badger darted toward her, disappearing and then reappearing as a tattoo on her wrist.

"Something's happening," Rollan observed. "You need to have Jhi get you back to full strength. We may need to move quick."



Within the hour, Jhi had Meilin feeling better. Rollan apprised her of everything that had happened since her injury. The panda was still licking Meilin's head when a flurry of activity outside made Jhi stop. Meilin sat up, ready for action.

Outside, loud cheers erupted as the tent panels were thrust open and a guard entered carrying a basket of vines and grasses. "These are for the Great Panda," he said, placing the basket in the corner. He watched curiously as Jhi ambled over.

"What's going on outside?" Meilin asked.

The guard smiled. "We've received the signal that one of the hunters is returning. Come." He walked over to the tent panel and pulled it open. "I don't think there's any harm for you to see who won." He glanced at Jhi chewing on a vine. "But your spirit animal should stay here."

"I don't think you can tear her away from her breakfast," Rollan said, offering his arm to Meilin as she stood up.

"I got it," Meilin said, waving him off.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he whispered.

Shuffling their feet because their ankles were still chained together, Meilin and Rollan went outside. A short distance away, Meilin spotted Conor and Anka standing in front of a tent.

"Meilin!" Anka shouted and lurched forward before stumbling to a halt. Her ankle was chained to one of the tent posts. "You're fine?"

"I am!" Meilin answered.

Anka's face was awash with relief. Meilin could tell how concerned she'd been about her. It was good to have friends who cared so deeply.

"Nice to have you back!" Conor shouted.

"Look." Rollan pointed to a large man carrying a gazelle over his shoulder. The man was being congratulated by several people. "It's Khai, the hunter I told you about."

“Abeke lost?” Meilin was shocked. Abeke was the best hunter she knew.

Khai dropped the gazelle on a wooden pallet as Jehan rushed out from one of the tents. She had a serious look on her face.

“Jehan, I have brought victory once again, but I must tell you—”

“Later. I need to talk to you inside,” Jehan declared, apparently uninterested in the details of Khai’s hunt.

Khai’s expression quickly changed. He scanned the camp, his eyes locking on Meilin. Something was wrong, but it seemed only Jehan knew what it was.

“Khai, tell us the story of your victory!” one of the guards shouted.

Khai gave him a slight smile and waved. “Not now,” he said as others began to sense the unease that permeated the air. The time for hunting challenges was apparently over.

“We need to escape,” Meilin whispered. “They’re planning something.”

Rollan nodded in agreement.

Just then the sound of a ram’s horn being blown in the distance made everyone in the camp stop what they were doing. A second bellowing sound quickly followed.

“Intruders! Take your positions!” a guard yelled, and everyone rushed to grab a weapon.

“Now’s our chance!” Meilin looked back at Jhi, who was chomping away at a bushel of leaves.

But Jehan was already running toward them. “We’re setting you free,” she announced. “You must leave the camp at once and not return.” She pulled out a key and unlocked the shackle around each of their ankles.

“Why? What’s happening?” Rollan asked. Across the camp, Khai was releasing Conor and Anka as well.

“The people you call the Oathbound ... they’re approaching from the mountains on the other side of the valley.” She turned to one of the guards. “Bring them their bags,” she instructed, then hustled to grab her own sword and a quiver full of arrows.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Meilin whispered as the camp emptied out and Conor and Anka rushed over. “Why wouldn’t she turn us over to the Oathbound?”

Rollan shrugged; he seemed as perplexed as Meilin.

“What’s going on around here?” a familiar voice shouted.

Abeke entered the nearly desolate camp, her face and clothes covered in dust. Meilin noticed that she was carrying a dead hyena over her shoulder, but they had bigger problems now.

“The Oathbound are coming,” Conor replied. He pulled on his cloak and tightened the holster that once again carried his ax.

“And for some reason the Dasat have decided to let us go,” Anka added.

“If you’d rather we turn you over to the Oathbound, that can still be arranged.” Jehan had returned, holding a small vial in her hand. “Although Khai argued against it.” She looked at Abeke. “He told me what you and your spirit animal did. You’ve proven yourself a worthy friend to the Dasat, and so the challenge is considered a tie. We are granting you passage through our land.”

“Jehan!” Khai called out from a mountain ridge. “We await your orders.”

“Here.” Jehan handed Abeke the glass tube, filled with a scarlet substance. “This is the demon tree sap. Take it and go quickly. We will delay the Oathbound.”

“I’m not sure what to say, except thank you.” Abeke glanced up at Khai, who raised his hand in recognition.

Anka had already faded from sight and Conor had called out Briggan, who stood proudly next to him. His silver fur glistened in the morning sun.

“Hopefully the Oathbound won’t be interested in the Dasat. If pressed, you can say we escaped,” Conor suggested.

Jehan laughed. “That is something no one would believe.” She turned to Rollan. “Last night, you mentioned that you were seeking the edge of the land. I think I know what that is. Follow me.” Jehan took a few steps with Rollan while Livora scuttered behind them. Jehan pointed to a plateau in the distance. “The flat top of that mountain has an overlook. When viewed from a certain angle, it gives the impression that the world beneath you ends. It can feel like you’re at the edge of the land. That might be where you need to go.”

Rollan nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “That’s a big help.”

“All right.” Meilin joined them. She was feeling antsy. They were spending too much time with all this chitchat. “We need to get moving before the Oathbound arrive.”

Livora opened her mouth, revealing her sharp teeth, and hissed at Meilin.

Meilin glared at the honey badger. The dislike was mutual.

Jehan placed her hand on Rollan's arm and drew closer. "I believe you're a friend of the Dasat, and I hope you choose to return one day. You'll be welcomed here."

"I'd like that," Rollan said as Meilin tugged on his sleeve.

"We have to hurry," Meilin urged. They couldn't afford to waste any more time. Jhi had already gone into passive state, and Uraza had rejoined the group. They needed to get away from the approaching Oathbound. Plus, if Meilin was honest with herself, she simply didn't like the way Jehan was speaking to Rollan.

"Of course. I, too, have to go." Jehan sprinted off to join Khai and the others, who were headed in the opposite direction. "Good luck!" she shouted back. "May Fate and Skill be with you."

Meilin scowled. This Dasat girl was annoying. But what she'd said was true enough. They would need fate, skill, and a lot of luck to complete their mission of regaining the Greencloaks' good name.



STORM'S WRATH

CONOR AND THE OTHER GREENCLOAKS HURRIED TO reach the plateau that Jehan had shown Rollan. Even if the Dasat slowed down the Oathbound, there was no time to spare. The Greencloaks hiked for most of the day over grueling, uneven terrain and crossed fast, slippery streams, while the blazing sun of Nilo beat down on them. By the time the group reached their final climb, the day had grown cloudy and a heavy fog rolled over everything except the tops of the mountain range. Visibility soon dropped to the point where Conor could only see Briggan if he was right next to him; otherwise the wolf simply disappeared into the mist.

“You think these are the clouds we’re supposed to walk through?” Conor asked. He knew his friends were nearby, but he couldn’t see anything except the gray haze.

“What?” Abeke called out from somewhere in the mist.

“The ones in Tembo’s message,” Conor said. “Didn’t it say that after we passed the valley of death and got the demon’s blood, we’d have to go through some clouds to arrive at the edge of the land?”

“It did,” Meilin answered. “And Tembo said the queen’s glory would then be revealed. I can’t imagine he’d make us come all the way out here if he wasn’t referring to Stormspeaker as the queen’s glory.”

From high above them, Conor heard Essix screech.

“Keep going,” Rollan called out. “We’re almost out of all this fog. It gets clearer as we near the top.”

Rollan was right. As Conor hiked higher up the mountain, the fog began to thin out. A few minutes later, he pulled himself over the top of a ridge and saw the flat vastness of the plateau. Stretching out in every direction was an almost barren landscape, punctuated with a few trees that seemed to rise out of the rocks. Conor tilted his head skyward to admire the streaks of purples, pinks, and oranges that the setting sun was creating.

“Look at this!” Anka called out, standing near the eastern edge of the plateau. “I think we’re definitely in the right place!”

Conor and the others raced over and saw what she meant. There was a sharp drop-off that disappeared into the blanket of clouds, which covered everything up to the horizon. Without mountains to obstruct the view, it seemed as if they were floating above the world.

“It’s like Tembo said,” Conor whispered. “We’re standing on the edge of the land, above the clouds.” The beauty of the scene awed hm.

“Want to spread out while we still have a little bit of light?” Meilin asked, breaking the mood. “We can cover more area that way, and see if the ‘queen’s glory’ is somehow revealed.”

“Wait ... look.” Abeke pointed to Uraza and Briggan, who were both headed in the same direction. In the distance, Essix was flying in tight circles over one spot.

“There must be something over there,” Rollan said. “Let’s go.”

The five Greencloaks took off running. Up ahead, Uraza and Briggan were now in a full sprint. They were in a race against time. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, and a cloud-filled night meant there would be little moonlight to help them find the crown.

Abeke had dashed ahead when she suddenly stopped, whirled around, and motioned for them all to get down. Conor crouched close to the ground, squinting into the distance at what looked like a small stone building near the far edge of the plateau.

“What do you think that is?” Anka asked.

“Some sort of lookout maybe ... ” Meilin took a few steps forward, keeping low to the ground.

High above, Essix squawked. She then swooped down, disappearing through one of the building’s broken windows.

Conor held his breath until the falcon popped out of another window, going back to circling the building.

“Looks like it’s empty,” Rollan said. “Essix would have warned us if someone was there.”

Abeke straightened up. “Then let’s go quickly, before we lose the last bits of daylight.”

Leaving Uraza and Briggan outside as guards, the Greencloaks entered the small stone building. Inside, Conor noticed several half-spent candles littering the floor. A wooden table had been flipped over and chairs were tossed against a far wall. A thick layer of dust and dirt covered everything.

“Who has the matches?” Rollan asked, picking up one of the candles.

“Here.” Conor had already lit a candle and carried it over.

“This place looks like it was ransacked ages ago,” Meilin remarked, while she and Abeke righted the table. “I doubt anything like a crown was left behind.”

“If it was hidden like the Heart of the Land and the Wildcat’s Claw were, then ... ” Rollan ran his fingers along the wall, searching for a lever or notch that might reveal a secret compartment. “Maybe whoever was here before couldn’t find it.”

“Well, we’re definitely in the right place.” Abeke took one of the lit candles and walked to a corner alcove. She illuminated a statue carved into one of the stone walls, of a woman with her hands cupped in front of her. “I’m pretty sure this is supposed to be Nefrini.” Abeke looked around at the sparseness of the building. “I think this might be more of a shrine than a lookout post.”

Conor brought his own candle and added to the light in the alcove. He blew some of the dust off the wall beneath the statue, where something had been etched into the stone. “There’s writing here.”

Meilin and Rollan walked over and the alcove flickered with the lights of the candles. The shadows cast by the Greencloaks danced across the stones. Conor used the bottom of his shirt to wipe more of the dust off the carving.

Anka read it out loud. “*The storm’s wrath has no mercy until hands drip with the blood of demons and ancestors.*”

“Whoa,” Rollan muttered, stepping back. “Hands dripping with the blood of demons and ancestors ... Even knowing it means tree sap, that really does not sound good. If you ask me, I think Tembo had a little too much flair for the dramatic.”

Abeke reached up and wiped the dust off the statue. “Maybe it has nothing to do with Stormspeaker.”

“Right.” Conor rolled his eyes. “It’s just a warm and fuzzy bedtime story.” Everyone turned and stared at him. “Sorry ... guess I’m just a little tired.” He walked to the window and gazed into the pitch-black night. There was no glass in the window frame and a soft breeze swept over his head, rustling his hair into his face. He brushed it away, his fingers lingering over the mark on his forehead. He couldn’t help thinking about what Naveb had said ... that the Wyrms had changed him ... set him apart from the others, making him see things differently than they did.

Perhaps he should be thinking about their mission in a different way. Would devoting himself to fixing the things in Eura that the Greencloaks had destroyed while under the Wyrms’ control be such a bad thing?

Conor glanced behind him at the others, still scanning the stone building for clues. He shook his head, dispensing with his own question. No, he loved his homeland, but the Greencloaks served everyone equally. And he couldn’t imagine fighting against any of his friends.

Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan ... each of them was so different from Conor, and from each other. They were from far-flung corners of Erdas, but the Greencloaks had brought them together to help. They *had* to regain the Greencloaks’ good name, to show the world that it was possible for every nation to unite under a common banner.

He placed his hands on the windowsill, leaned forward, and took a deep breath.

CLICK!

The frame dropped about an inch and Conor jumped back. He heard a rumbling from outside and the building began to shake. Something had been triggered.

“What did you do?” Meilin’s eyes darted around the room as the candles on the table began to wobble.

“Nothing!” Conor rushed over and picked up a candle before it toppled over. “I leaned against the windowsill and something clicked.”

The soft breeze blew stronger. With every passing second it picked up more dust, sand, and dirt. Suddenly, a burst of air shot through the building, blowing out all the candles.

“I think it’s a sandstorm!” Abeke shouted over the high, whistling wind that was now engulfing them.

“Or a tornado!” Rollan bellowed as the chairs tumbled against the far wall. “Get away from the windows.”

Conor flung the door open and stepped outside. “BRIGGAN!” he yelled, holding out his arm as a driving rain—a downpour that hadn’t been there seconds before—battered his skin. The storm was fiercer than any he had ever seen. He leaned into the wind to keep his balance and yelled again. “BRIGGAN!”

Lightning flashed overhead, and in that instant he saw both Briggan and Uraza trying to make their way toward him. Uraza was crouched low to the ground, crawling toward the building, but Briggan was stumbling and losing his footing. A storm that could stop the Great Beasts was not an ordinary storm.

“URAZA!” Abeke shouted, bracing herself in the doorway only a few feet behind Conor.

“HERE!” Conor shouted. It was a struggle just to be heard over the deafening roar that surrounded them. Another thunderbolt rocked the sky above as Briggan disappeared in a flash of his own and joined Conor as a tattoo on the back of his forearm.

A sudden gust of wind pulled the front door off its hinges, yanking Abeke from her feet and sending her tumbling to the ground. The door sailed into the night sky like a child’s kite freed of its string.

“I’m fine!” Abeke called out. She braced against the storm as she stood and checked under her elbow for Uraza’s tattoo.

Another lightning strike lit up the sky. Conor could see blood pouring out of a large gash over Abeke’s right eye.

“You’re bleeding!” Conor shouted as Abeke wiped her face.

“Get inside!” Rollan yelled, standing just inside the doorway. “None of this is normal!”

More lightning flashes followed as Conor and Abeke ran into the building, where Meilin had created a sort of barricade with the table backed into a corner.

“What do you mean by not normal?” Conor shouted over the fury of the wind and the hail that was now pelting the roof.

“All of this!” Anka yelled as they all huddled under the table. “It’s like every storm’s wrath put together!”

“No mercy from the storm’s wrath.... ” Abeke crawled out from the barricade. “It’s the statue!” she proclaimed. “The key to stopping the

storm is there!” From her pocket she pulled out the vial of demon tree sap that Jehan had given her. “It wants this ... and my blood!”



NEFRINI

THE HOWLING WIND WHIPPED AROUND THE ROOM AS the roof began to buckle and lift. Abeke's idea had to work. They wouldn't be able to survive the storm's onslaught much longer ... especially if they became fully exposed to the elements outside.

Abeke faced the statue of Nefrini, the wind slapping her braids against her cheeks as she opened the glass vial. She tipped it over and let a few drops of the demon tree sap fall into the statue's cupped hands.

A ripping and cracking sound echoed as the roof began to break apart, creating a gaping hole in the ceiling. Fist-sized hail rained down into the room and lightning crackled in the dark sky above.

Abeke touched the cut over her eye, smearing her fingertips until they were wet. "My blood is the blood of Nilo!" she shouted into the wind. "The blood of our ancestors!" She smeared her hands against those of the statue, letting the demon tree sap mix with her own blood.

The battering hailstorm suddenly stopped and the wind reduced its intensity, becoming little more than a strong breeze. There was one more flash of lightning, but with it the driving rain turned into a shower, then a trickle, until it stopped completely. The building rattled a few more times as the roof and walls adjusted to the sudden calm. A thick fog like the one they'd climbed through to reach the top of the plateau filtered in through the windows and torn roof.

"You did it!" Conor exclaimed. He pushed the table out of the way and picked up a battered candle from the floor.

“Do you think a spirit is going to speak to us again?” Meilin rolled her hand through the air, creating rivulets within the mist.

Rollan raised a candle he had lit and brought it over to Conor. “I think we’re about to find out.” He pointed to the concentration of fog swirling around Abeke.

Abeke spun around as the cloud of mist surrounding her slithered away and took the shape of a woman.

“Is that who we think it is?” Conor asked.

Abeke said nothing. If this was Nefrini, then she deserved reverence. Speaking out of turn would not be wise. Plus, if their prior experiences with the bond tokens were any indication, then only those born on the continent would be able to communicate with the spirit. That meant only she would be able to hear Nefrini’s words.

“Is she saying anything?” Rollan asked.

Abeke put a finger to her lips.

“Maybe you should introduce yourself,” Meilin suggested.

Abeke shook her head. Instead, she took a seat on the floor. A hunter had to be patient sometimes.

A minute passed, then two.

As the others lit more candles, creating a warm glow within the room, the fog congealed even more, revealing the woman’s regal stature and kind face. There was no doubt this was Nefrini, and she was gazing down at Abeke.

Daughter of Nilo. Nefrini had a soft, gentle voice that bounced around inside Abeke’s head. *You have stirred my slumber. What is it that you seek?*

Abeke glanced over at her friends, who were oblivious to what was being said. Nefrini was speaking only to her.

“High Chieftess Nefrini, we are here for Stormspeaker.”

Of course you are. But why should it be entrusted to you? You are children. What have you done to deserve it?

“My friends and I, we are Greencloaks and have saved Erdas twice. But our existence as a group is being threatened. We must show that through our unity we can best serve everyone. Long ago, your bond token was given to us as a symbol of this unity, along with three others from across Erdas. The Greencloaks hid the tokens, wary of their power being misused, but present circumstances require us to retrieve all four.”

I see. Nefrini floated past Abeke and paused in front of the other Greencloaks before returning to Abeke. Bond tokens reflect the epitome of trust. Do you believe that these allies of yours are honest and true?

“I do,” Abeke answered without hesitation.

And do they feel the same about you? Nefrini asked.

Abeke turned to her friends. “She wants to know if you trust me to be honest and true.”

“Yes!” they all proclaimed in unison.

Nefrini nodded in approval. Then a curl of mist flowed out from the spirit, wrapping itself around Abeke’s wrist. Not of her own volition, Abeke felt herself flipping over her arm to reveal the leopard tattoo.

Your spirit animal is Uraza, Nefrini observed, letting go of Abeke’s arm. The Great Beast chose you as her human partner.... That is very telling.

Abeke remained quiet.

I, too, had an incredible bond with my spirit animal, she mused. Nazir, my hammerkop, was with me when I lost my mother and when my son was born. She gave me a perspective on life like no one else. We were inseparable.

Abeke glanced at her tattoo. She wanted to think that way about her bond with Uraza, but Zerif had separated them for a while and pitted the two against each other. The pain of that time was still a thorn in Abeke’s heart.

Nefrini bent down to get a closer look at Abeke. *I can tell that you are a hunter by nature, but I also sense the power of the Rain Dancer flowing through your bond. The Rain Dancer tradition was our gift to Nilo. I’m pleased to see it survives.*

“You were a Rain Dancer?” Abeke asked.

Nefrini nodded. *The first. Though truly it was Nazir’s craft. And when we created our token, we gave a bit of that power to the land of Nilo itself. Bonds formed here are special. Some are touched by my old friend’s gift. In that way, she lives forever.*

Nefrini paused, studying Abeke for a moment. *In life, as with a hunt, you must always perceive what surrounds you. In front, beside, and behind.*

Abeke nodded in agreement. It was similar to what Naveb had told her.

Prepare for the future by observing the present and understanding the past. She turned without warning and pointed both fog-filled arms toward the statue. Her fingertips emanated a brilliant blue light.

“What is she—?” Abeke heard Conor begin to ask, when a single lightning bolt shot out from Nefrini’s hands, hitting the statue and shattering it into dozens of pieces that went flying across the room.

“Whoa!” Meilin exclaimed as the Greencloaks all jumped against the wall.

Go to where the statue was, Nefrini instructed. *My crown is yours to use.*

Abeke quickly stepped over the broken pieces of stone strewn along the floor. Pressed against the wall was a simple gold headdress with wings on either side. A bird holding a green gem. Abeke chiseled the crown out with her fingertips.

“Stormspeaker,” Abeke whispered, the crown glimmering in the candlelight. “Thank you.”

“She’s disappearing!” Rollan called out.

Abeke turned back to Nefrini. The chieftess had begun to fade, the fog dispersing into the atmosphere.

“Your Highness ... please wait!” Abeke called out. “I have questions.”

I’m sure you do, daughter of Nilo. Questions are good, and you should always seek answers. But I’m afraid my time here is over, Nefrini explained.

“But the crown ... what does it do?” Abeke said, holding the golden diadem in her hand. “How do I use it?”

You have already witnessed its power. Use it wisely. But you must be careful, there is—

“Ask her where the Dragon’s Eye is!” Anka said, interrupting Nefrini. “She has to tell us before she goes!”

Abeke noticed the last traces of fog shift to look at Anka. Although there wasn’t much definition of Nefrini left in the mist, Abeke thought she saw the woman scowl.

Then she was gone. A gentle breeze once again reclaimed the air, and everything was silent for a few seconds.

“So?” Rollan asked. “What did she say? Did she tell you how to use it? How about where the Dragon’s Eye is hidden?”

“There wasn’t time,” Abeke said with a sigh. “We’ll have to go back to the monastery and just hope that Tembo left another clue there.” Abeke inspected the gold crown in her hand, turning it slowly to see every side. “I think it controls the weather.... That’s why it’s called Stormspeaker.”

“You’re still bleeding,” Meilin said, drawing closer to Abeke and looking at the gash over her eye. “I can ask Jhi to help you.”

Abeke sat down. Her head was beginning to throb, although she wasn’t sure if it was from the blow or from having Nefrini speak through her thoughts.

Jhi appeared in the room and immediately approached Abeke. The large panda pulled Abeke into a cradling embrace and gave her two quick licks over her eye.

“Panda spit works every time,” Rollan said with a smile.

“We should stay the night here and get some rest.” Conor unpacked his bag and laid out several items on the table. “In the morning, we can head back to the monastery.”

“What if the Oathbound are still there?” Abeke asked, keeping the cut eye closed as Jhi stroked her head with her soft, furry paw.

“They’ve likely moved on by now,” Anka said. “The Oathbound probably left and formed search parties to look for us.”

Abeke glanced at Anka. Her clothes and skin had blended into the floor, but Abeke could see her shadow curled up like a cat in the corner of the room. Her thoughts went to Uraza.

She released the Great Beast. Uraza quickly evaluated her injured partner and purred with concern, rubbing her nose against Abeke’s leg. “I’m fine,” Abeke whispered into the leopard’s ear. She then rolled away from Jhi to prove her point.

“Anka’s right.” Rollan stretched out his arms and cracked his knuckles before lying down on the stone floor. “The Oathbound will be on patrol, but Essix can help us scout the area. We just have to travel quick. We’ll leave at first light.”

“Look who’s giving orders now,” Meilin muttered under her breath.

“And once we get the Dragon’s Eye we can head back to Eura and retrieve the Wildcat’s Claw,” Conor added, curling up against Briggan. “We just have to be careful.”

Be careful.

The words reverberated in Abeke's head. It was what Nefrini had said before disappearing, but she hadn't had a chance to finish her warning.

"All in all, getting Stormspeaker wasn't too bad." Rollan leaned against the corner wall. "Jehan really did point us in the right direction, and we haven't seen any Oathbound the whole way."

"Hmpf ..." Meilin scoffed at his statement and lay next to Jhi. "Only if you consider being attacked by wild hyenas, captured by the Dasat, fleeing from the Oathbound, and surviving a supernatural storm to be *not too bad*."

Rollan shrugged. "Compared to what we've gone through in the past ... it certainly wasn't the worst. We're all still here, together."

Abeke smiled. Rollan was right. This hadn't been so bad. It seemed they'd figured out how to give the Oathbound the slip.

Perhaps the worst was truly over.



CAVE DWELLER

ROLLAN COULDN'T BELIEVE HOW FORTUNATE THEY were. The Greencloaks had been traveling back to the monastery for two days, only stopping for a few hours at night to rest, and they hadn't encountered any Oathbound, hyenas, or other troublemakers. They'd made good time with Essix flying overhead, scouting the mountains for potential problems and directing them along the shortest possible route.

"Essix is taking a lot longer than usual, isn't she?" Meilin scanned the sky. "It's been at least an hour since we've seen her."

Rollan grimaced. The open expanse of the savannah stretched before them. With only a couple of hours of daylight left, he didn't like the idea of being out in the open without Essix giving them the all clear. "I think we should wait to cross. She'll be back soon enough. Plus, crossing the savannah at night is probably safer."

"Actually, night is when most predators are active," Abeke reminded him, taking a seat on a nearby rock. "Hyenas and lions and all sorts of beasts. We'll still have to be careful."

"Let me see if I can connect with Essix," Rollan suggested. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift. Soon he sensed the falcon's keen vision within his mind and he could see through her eyes. However, the usual sensation of flying, of gliding through the air, was missing. Rollan quickly noticed that Essix was perched in an acacia tree, close to the base of the mountain.

The falcon turned her head, focused on a nearby cave opening, and took off toward it. Flying through the narrow entrance, Essix beat back her wings, landing gingerly on the gravel-covered ground. Taking several steps deeper into the cave, Essix stared at a figure sitting in a corner wearing a hooded cloak.

Slowly, the person lifted off the hood and smiled.

“It’s Xanthe!” Rollan told the others. “Essix found her. She’s not too far from here.”

“Is she alone?” Anka asked.

“Or hurt?” Abeke followed up.

“No one else is there, and she seems fine.” Rollan concentrated on his connection with Essix. Xanthe was saying something, but Rollan couldn’t tell what it was. He felt Essix turn her head and fly out of the cave. Once again, the freedom of being in the air, the land rushing along beneath her wings, filled Rollan’s spirit. He was one with Essix, but the connection couldn’t last much longer. Already he felt light-headed.

He opened his eyes and regained his bearings.

“Well, what happened?” Meilin asked as Rollan took a deep breath and sat on the ground.

“I think Xanthe is waiting for night before she crosses the savannah,” he said. “She was saying something to Essix, but I don’t know what it was.”

“So let’s go find her.” Abeke shook the dust off her cloak. “We can all travel together.”

Essix screeched, circling overhead.

“She got here fast.” Rollan pulled out a piece of jerky from his bag and lifted it in the air. Essix dove down and snatched it from his hand. “Means we don’t have to go too far. Xanthe is probably hiding nearby.”

Briggan led the group around the base of the mountain, following Essix’s flight path high above. Uraza had disappeared once again, out scouring the area for Oathbound, hyenas, or another meal. It didn’t take long before Rollan recognized the acacia tree where Essix had been perched.

“We’re close,” Rollan announced.

“I’m going up there.” Meilin pointed to a small ridge above the cave. “I’ll be a lookout in case the Oathbound decide to come our way.”

“Want some company?” Rollan offered, sensing that something had been bothering Meilin ever since they’d left the Dasat camp. He just

didn't know what it was.

"Sure," Meilin replied, then turned away from him. "Anka ... why don't you come with me?"

Rollan felt a wave of disappointment. He was certain he hadn't done anything wrong, but it felt as if there were a wedge growing between the two of them.

"Already climbing," Anka said, her barely visible form blending against the rocks.

"Briggan found something." Conor pointed to the wolf standing at the mouth of the cave.

"We'll switch in a little while," Abeke offered Meilin. "So you can rest up before we cross the savannah tonight."

"Sure," Meilin called down.

Conor, Abeke, and Rollan approached the cave cautiously, but Briggan seemed at ease and lay down at the entrance. Rollan stepped around the wolf and, as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw Xanthe sitting on the floor with the hood of her cloak pulled back. Her white hair shone with the bit of sunlight that reflected inside the cave.

"Hi, strangers," she greeted them all with a smile. "Had a feeling you might show up after Essix's visit. I got this far and then started to worry about you guys. Figured I'd stick around to see that you all made it back safe." She peered around the three of them. "Where's Meilin and Anka?"

"They're right above us." Rollan pointed up. "Keeping watch from the ridge."

"And Uraza's out there enjoying Nilo," Abeke added. "Hopefully, keeping an eye out for any trouble until we get back to the monastery."

Xanthe's face lit up. "Does that mean you found Stormspeaker? Is that why you're heading back?"

"Yep. We sure did." Conor dropped the bag he'd been carrying and sat next to Xanthe.

"Can I see it?" Xanthe looked over at his bag.

"It's in Meilin's bag," Abeke said quickly.

Rollan glanced at Abeke, who didn't return his gaze. He knew that Abeke had the crown, but for some reason she didn't want to show it to Xanthe. Maybe she was right, and they should keep it as hidden as possible for now.

"Um ... yeah." Conor fidgeted a little with the strap of his own bag. "So we're going back to the monastery in case Takoda's discovered

something about the Dragon's Eye."

"But what if he hasn't?" Xanthe asked. "What's the plan then?"

Abeke's lie about the location of the crown was causing Rollan to rethink what was discussed with Xanthe. It wasn't anything against her personally, but Rollan knew it was dangerous to divulge too much information, for Xanthe and them. "We're not sure," Rollan said. "We'll have to cross that bridge once we get to it."

"But you have to start thinking of where else to look," Xanthe continued. "I mean, Tembo may have only left clues to Stormspeaker. You should try to see if there's a pattern to where the other tokens were found."

"We're looking into it." Abeke took a seat on the gravel floor. "So tell us about the last few days. Have you run into any problems? Seen any Oathbound?"

"Not really," Xanthe replied. "I've been moving at night and it's been pretty quiet." She studied the three Greencloaks. "But back to the last token ... do you think it's still in Nilo?"

Rollan knew that they had to be honest with Xanthe. She deserved nothing less. "Xanthe, I think it's best if certain things are kept between Greencloaks. You understand, right?"

"Oh, that again. Sure." Xanthe nodded, but her mouth tightened. "Guess I keep forgetting that I'm not one of you, so I can't be trusted," she mumbled.

"It's not that," Conor replied. "We've all just been through a lot, so we're a little ... cautious."

"Uh-huh." Xanthe eyed him carefully, lingering on the faded mark on his forehead. It was a reminder that she'd seen him at his worst and still trusted him. "Don't forget that I've been through a lot, too. In fact ... you were there when it happened."

"We know," Abeke said softly. "And we appreciate everything you've done and are doing. But ... " She sighed. "The less you know, the better. We don't want to put you in any more harm."

Xanthe rolled her eyes. "Riiiiight. You're being secretive for my benefit. It's like what everyone warned me about."

Rollan didn't like the way that sounded. "What do you mean?"

Xanthe leaned against the wall. "People talk about how the Greencloaks think they're superior, how you think you know what's best for everyone. I've heard the stories about what happened with the Nectar

and all the problems that brought. I just hope you aren't repeating the same mistakes."

The silence inside the cave was deafening, but no one had a good response. Rollan wanted to say that he too hoped they weren't making a mistake, but admitting that didn't seem like a good idea. So the four of them just sat quietly until one by one they each drifted off to sleep. A late-afternoon nap was a luxury they normally didn't enjoy.



"Fire! In the distance!" Meilin's words startled everyone.

"What?" Xanthe rushed to the cave entrance, where Briggan was sniffing the air. The sun was still out, but it was hovering over the horizon. "Where?"

"A little bit to the west," Meilin answered. "And it has to be pretty big, based on the amount of smoke."

Xanthe pulled up her hood and marched outside. Even with the sun so low in the sky, she had to squint. But Rollan could see the horror in her expression.

"It's the monastery," she said in quiet disbelief.

"No." Conor shook his head, not wanting to believe what he was seeing.

"It's got to be the Oathbound's doing." Rollan stared at the plume of dark black smoke rising in the distance. "They're burning the place down!"

Xanthe turned to the others, her pale face grave. "Takoda is there. We have to help him ... all of them."

"Hold on." Abeke opened her bag. "I have an idea." She pulled out the gold crown and flipped it over gently in her hands.

"Is that ... wait, I thought Meilin had it in her—" Xanthe stopped herself and crossed her arms across her chest. "Oh, right. Never mind."

"Xanthe, please understand. I think I can help Takoda and the monastery," Abeke said, placing Nefrini's crown on her head. "This is what the Greencloaks do ... help others."

Meilin looked at Xanthe and then Abeke. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," they both answered in unison.

Rollan moved closer to Abeke. "You sure about this?" he asked. "We aren't totally certain what this can do. Remember how that storm nearly pried the roof off?"

Abeke nodded. "I have to try. Now stand back." She closed her eyes, then opened one. "Better yet, go back in the cave."

Rollan and the others moved just inside the cave's entrance, watching as Abeke stood still. She closed her eyes again and tilted her head slightly back, facing the sky.

At first there was only quiet. Then, the small rustling of wind as menacing clouds formed suddenly overhead. Darkness shrouded the area, and the air grew cool, then cold. Rollan poked his head out as a strong gust of wind whipped by the cave and a dust storm swirled around Abeke. Thunder rumbled overhead. A few fat raindrops hit a nearby boulder, leaving tracks along the side of the dusty rock.

Abeke squeezed her eyes tighter.

The raindrops increased and fell to the earth in drumlike beats, yet Abeke remained dry. The rain and wind seemed to purposefully avoid her.

"You have to send the clouds across the savannah. It does no good here!" Xanthe exclaimed. "The fire is over there."

Abeke silently nodded, but the storm clouds didn't budge.

The rain slowed to a light trickle and then to an almost invisible misting of water.

The wind fluttered to a stop and the clouds parted, once again revealing the setting sun.

Abeke frowned into the sky as her shoulders drooped. "It won't move," she said.

Xanthe burst out from the cave entrance, pointing toward the smoke. "You have to try again. You have to!"

"I can't," Abeke rasped. "Nothing happens. It only stays overhead."

"Then we'll have to take the storm there ourselves." Xanthe pulled up the hood of her cloak. "Let's go!"



THE RETURN

MEILIN ENTERED THE TAABARA CHASM WITH HER sword drawn, ready to battle any Oathbound guards who might be lurking in the shadows. They had crossed the savannah under a cloud-filled night sky. The darkness shrouded them from any sentries keeping watch, but this place would be different. The deep crater was striped with land bridges and crevices where the Oathbound could be lying in wait for them.

“Keep alert,” Xanthe whispered, leading the group to the bottom of the chasm. “Our luck may not hold much longer.”

But everything was quiet.

“I don’t think anyone’s here.” Abeke spun around, her arrow nocked and ready to fly. “Isn’t that a bit strange?”

“It’s very strange.” Rollan looked up at Essix, who had given them the all clear. “You’d think someone would be guarding this place. At the very least guarding the fissure that leads to the monastery.”

“The Oathbound may have everyone at the monastery,” Anka said, approaching the entrance to the fissure. “Perhaps they didn’t expect us to come back. If we hear or see anything, get close to me. I’ll camouflage us.”

“I think I should go first,” Xanthe suggested. “I’ll be the best at spotting someone in the dark, especially if they’re on the other side where the rope ladders are.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Meilin concurred. “I’ll bring up the rear, in case we get a surprise attack from behind.”

“Then let’s go.” Rollan waved his arm at Essix and pointed to the crevasse. The falcon would be waiting for them on the other side.

As quickly as possible, the group made their way through the narrowing passageway. Before long, they were forced to shuffle through it sideways. Meilin reluctantly sheathed her sword. There was no room to fight at this point.

“Do you smell it?” Rollan whispered. He’d slowed down to get closer to Meilin.

“The smoke?” she answered, taking a long sniff of the air. “Yes, it’s getting stronger.”

“No,” Rollan said. “The smell of victory. The Oathbound have no idea what we have in store for them.”

Meilin rolled her eyes. She couldn’t see him in the darkness, but she knew Rollan was smiling. He was always trying to lighten the mood and be the funny man. This time it bothered her.

“You don’t always have to make jokes,” she said. “It’s okay to be serious once in a while.”

“I can be serious,” Rollan replied. “Not my fault if I’m just naturally likable.”

“Yeah, apparently you are *very* likable.” Meilin hadn’t meant to sound caustic, but her feelings betrayed her.

“What are you talking about?” Rollan stopped shuffling through the crevasse. “You’ve been acting strange ever since we left the Dasat camp. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Meilin nudged him to keep moving, but he stayed still. They weren’t going anywhere until they finished this conversation. Meilin sighed. “I just find it weird that Jehan was so friendly to you and invited you to come back after only knowing you for a day.”

“Is that it?” Rollan chuckled. “You’re jealous?”

“What? No.” Meilin scoffed at the suggestion. “It just seems unusual.”

“Well, like I said, I am a very likable guy.”

Meilin could hear the snicker in his voice.

“Forget it.” Meilin pushed him again, but he stood firm.

“Meilin.” His voice took a softer tone. “I think Jehan was just impressed because I was able to shift the whole mountain for you. That’s all.”

“Wait, what?” Meilin couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. Rollan had moved an entire mountain for her?

“Yeah, well, I just knew I had to help you no matter what, so I used the Heart of the Land to create a ledge for you to land on. I guess I should’ve mentioned that before, but ... I don’t know ... I just didn’t.”

Meilin didn’t know what to say. She’d always believed that feelings and emotions weren’t supposed to come into play when on a mission, but everything with Rollan was different. She was experiencing feelings that she normally kept under control. Even little bits of jealousy.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Rollan broke the ice. “Yeah, well, you took care of me when I had the Sunset Death ... couldn’t let you continue to hold that over me. Had to do something to get us on equal footing.”

Meilin tried to see Rollan’s features in the darkness of the crevasse, but she could only see his silhouette. She reached over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks,” she whispered.

Rollan was about to say something when Conor interrupted with a loud “PSSSST!”

“Come on.” Rollan gave Meilin a tug. “We’ll talk more later.”

They hurried over and caught up to the others.

“Xanthe says the ledge is up ahead,” Anka whispered, relaying the message. “And there are two Oathbound on it.”

“Let’s do this,” Rollan said.

“We’re ready,” Meilin confirmed.

Abeke put on the crown and sat down. It had been decided that Anka would stay with her, in case she needed to be camouflaged while the others fought the guards.

Everyone held their breaths as Abeke concentrated on bringing about a storm. The idea was to have it rain hard enough to put out the fire in the monastery. Then, with the first crack of lightning, the others would launch an attack on the guards, with the thunder masking the sounds of the fight. Timing would be critical.

The air stirred as a cool breeze filtered into the crevasse.

A few raindrops hit Meilin on the head. She pulled up her hood and unsheathed her sword. The downpour was about to begin.

A sudden storm deluged the area. The rain fell hard as the clouds rumbled above them.

Lightning flashed suddenly between the clouds overhead, illuminating the sky into shades of black, blue, and dark purple. This was it.

Xanthe, Conor, Meilin, and Rollan ran out from the crevasse, barreling into the guards as thunder boomed around them.

A swift kick to the knee. An elbow to the jaw. The pommel of Meilin's sword sideswiping a guard's head.

And silence.

It was over as quickly as it had begun.

In less than a moment, two Oathbound guards were knocked out and Conor was tying them up.

"Go, quickly," Xanthe whispered, grabbing one of the rope ladders that led up to monastery. "We don't have much time."

The group climbed up to the higher level, swiftly and silently. Once they'd scaled the overhang, they hid behind a row of thorny bushes that lined the edge of the cliff. Peering out between the leaves, they could assess what was going on in the monastery. There were Oathbound soldiers moving past the upper windows, but only one guard patrolled the raised iron gate at the front.

"Over there," Conor whispered, pointing to a smoldering part of the building. "Looks like that's what they were burning."

"It's part of the library," Xanthe explained. "Takoda would never allow that to be destroyed without putting up a fight." Her voice faltered. "I—I should never have left. My place was with him...."

Meilin put a hand on Xanthe's shoulder. She knew Xanthe had seen her people overrun by the Many during their battle with Wyrn, and had fought hard for them. "I'm sure he's all right. Takoda is smart and brave. We'll find him and beat the Oathbound."

"Is the main door the only way in?" Abeke asked, slipping on the gold headdress. "Because I can create a diversion—distract the guard with a windstorm or something."

Xanthe nodded. "Other than those upper windows, it's the—"

"Shh." Meilin pointed to the monastery's entrance. A broad-shouldered, bald man dressed all in black was talking to the guard.

"I know who that is," Anka whispered. "He was at the Citadel when the emperor was killed. They called him Sid the Generous, so I'm guessing that means he'd steal the crumbs from a street urchin's plate. No offense, Rollan."

Rollan snorted. “As if we had anything as fancy as *plates*.”

“You are all idiots!” Sid yelled to a group of warriors who had joined him by the iron gate. “Something is going on. Or am I the only one who can sense it?”

Meilin and the others froze.

“Everyone, hold hands,” Anka whispered. “I’ll hide us.” She interlocked her fingers with Conor, causing his arms to blend into the variegated colors of the bushes.

“All of us?” Meilin asked, knowing that Anka’s abilities had their limit.

“I can do it ... trust me,” she replied as everyone joined hands.

But the progression was worryingly sluggish. First Conor slowly disappeared, and then Xanthe’s skin blistered into leafy green rashes. Meilin could no longer see Anka, but she heard the elder Greencloak whimper with effort.

Suddenly, Sid turned on his heel and scowled. He marched toward the edge of the cliff, right to where the Greencloaks were hiding. His eyes widened with fury.

Meilin sucked in a breath. *It’s too late! He’s seen us!*

But then she turned to Rollan and found that he’d already vanished. Meilin glanced down to where their fingers were interlaced and saw ... nothing. Thorns and roots and shrubby leaves.

An animal that looked like a small bear or very large weasel trailed right behind Sid. Meilin recognized it as a wolverine—one of the most ferocious predators in the animal kingdom. Shane had once pretended his uncle’s wolverine was his own spirit animal. Meilin had seen how vicious and territorial it was. It figured that would be Sid the Generous’s animal partner.

Meilin’s free hand reached for the pommel of her sword. She glanced back at the sheer cliff behind them. They were in the worst possible spot for a fight, but it didn’t make a difference.

Any moment the battlefield could be declared, and they’d have to be ready to attack. She gripped the sword’s handle.

It was now or never.



SID THE GENEROUS

THE WOLVERINE REARED UP ON ITS HIND LEGS, ITS NOSTRILS flaring as it moved its head from side to side. Even though they were hidden from view, it wasn't going to be enough. Conor could see that the animal was picking up their scent.

“Change the direction of the wind,” Conor whispered to Abeke. “If we're downwind, it'll only be able to smell the ashes from the fire.” A few seconds later the air stirred above them. Although Conor couldn't see Abeke, he assumed she was using the crown. A strong smell of smoke floated over them and down the mountain.

The wolverine fell back on its four legs and turned to face the building, where a few fires were still smoldering. The smoke was confusing it.

“Nothing?” Sid asked his spirit animal, who had apparently lost the scent.

Conor and the others stayed still, barely breathing.

Sid the Generous was not convinced. He took a few more steps toward the bushes and stared out into the night. Waiting for a sound or a movement.

Conor considered jumping him, but they'd be giving up their most valuable weapon ... the element of surprise. His prudence proved to be right; just a moment later, another small group of Oathbound emerged from the monastery.

“Sir ... ” A young-looking Oathbound warrior, probably not much older than fifteen, cautiously approached Sid from behind. “Um ... one of the guards sent me to tell you that we haven’t found any gold. Do you want us to keep—?”

Sid spun around and struck the boy squarely across the face with an open hand. The force from the slap knocked the young warrior to his knees. “KEEP LOOKING!” Sid bellowed. “I want results, not excuses! Now, stand up!”

The boy got up, clutching the side of his face.

Sid grabbed the young Oathbound’s shirt, twisting it in one hand and hoisting him up so they were face-to-face. “Tell the guards to scour the libraries ... every single crevice. I want some gold in my bag before the captain arrives, is that understood?”

“Y-y-yes, sir,” the boy stammered.

“Good!” Sid dropped the boy, who quickly turned and ran back inside the monastery. He scanned the area one more time, then motioned for the wolverine to follow him in.

Once Sid disappeared into the building, Xanthe snuck around the bush, pulling Anka along. “Stay close,” she whispered.

There was no discussion. They were all going in together. But as long as they held hands and moved slowly along the stone walls, they were virtually invisible.

As they passed several rooms and corridors, Conor noticed that there were virtually no guards inside. It seemed that they were all searching for Sid’s gold, and few were searching for the Greencloaks. If only they could find Takoda and the other monks, then maybe they could outnumber these Oathbound and regain control of the monastery.

“I’m done being patient!” Sid’s voice roared from the Great Hall.

Staying flush against the wall and using any shadows available, the group moved as one unit until they entered the hall. In the center of the chamber, beneath the wooden trusses that crisscrossed the ceiling, stood Sid the Generous. In front of him were the monks, lined up in a row with their hands and feet tied. Sid was staring down at Master Naveb.

Conor and the others slowly inched into the room, making sure they weren’t seen as they moved along the gray stone wall.

“Foolish old man,” Sid sneered. “Tell me what you know.”

“Untie me and see how old and foolish I am,” Master Naveb said defiantly.

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh!” Sid leaned closer to Master Naveb, placing both hands on the old monk’s shoulders. “Don’t you care that your precious Niloan history is being lost?” he asked. “Tell me where the gold is and we’ll stop destroying your libraries.”

“Even if I had some, I wouldn’t tell a degenerate like you,” Naveb said, his voice flat. His face betrayed not a hint of emotion.

Sid’s eyes blazed with fury as he lashed out at Naveb, kneeing him in the stomach and knocking the old man to the floor. “This is what happens when you don’t respect me.” He pulled back his leg and kicked the old man with all his might.

“STOP!” several of the monks shouted.

“Leave him alone!” Takoda fought against the ropes that bound him.

“This wasn’t part of the deal!” Sodu shouted from the end of the line. The young monk was also tied up, his face screwed into a scowl. “You gave me your word!”

“Deal? The deal was for the Greencloaks,” Sid sneered. “No Greencloaks, no deal.” Sid looked around the room. “And a place this vast must have its share of gold and valuable secrets.”

“Secrets? I know about a secret. What if we strike a new deal?” Sodu asked, his eyes darting over to Takoda. “How about something that’s valuable to the Greencloaks? Something called the Dragon’s Eye.”

Anka’s grip tightened around Conor’s hand. He felt his stomach turn, and a lump formed in his throat. *How does Sodu know about the final bond token? Did he stumble on the clue himself in the monastery?*

“Sodu ...” Master Naveb moaned while still on the floor. “Don’t.”

“Go on,” Sid replied.

“Takoda knows where it is,” Sodu continued, staring at the young monk. “I overheard him tell Master Naveb that he had to find a way to get word to the Greencloaks.”

“I see.” Sid raised a single eyebrow and strolled to stand in front of Takoda. “This is an interesting turn of events.” He stared in silence for several seconds, apparently weighing his options. “Seems like we might be able to help each other. I’d make it worth your while ... possibly share some of the gold with you. They don’t call me Sid the Generous for nothing.”

Takoda spat in his face.

Sid’s eyes burned. He responded with an uppercut punch to the chin that caught Takoda by surprise, dropping him to his knees.

Conor felt Xanthe flinch, but she stayed put. Any movement away from Anka would reveal her. They had to stay together and wait for the right moment.

Kovo, on the other hand, had awoken from his trance and was making his presence known. The Great Ape roared, fighting against the heavy chains that pinned him to the wall, baring his teeth at the Oathbound who had been guarding him.

“Idiot!” Sid wiped his face with his sleeve. “I’ll simply continue destroying the treasures of Nilo until you tell us where to find the Dragon’s Eye and your gold.” He walked around Takoda, standing behind the line of monks. “I don’t understand this silence. I’ve shown you proof that the Sadrean girl and one of the Greencloaks have already met their deaths. Why insist on protecting their secrets?”

“Takoda, just tell him!” Sodu urged. “This will be over if you say what you know!”

Kovo suddenly stopped struggling against his chains and sniffed the air. The large gorilla’s red eyes darted around the room. He quickly signed something to Takoda, who sat up and glanced curiously around.

Kovo’s actions weren’t lost on Sid. The Oathbound grabbed Takoda by the arm and dragged him to the center of the room. “Guards!” Sid yelled, calling out his spirit animal at the same time. “The Greencloaks are here!”

Before the Greencloaks or Xanthe could react, Sid pulled out a knife and held it to Takoda’s neck. “We’ve been waiting for your return, Greencloaks. Reveal yourselves ... or he dies!” His eyes nervously searched the room. Standing beside Sid, the wolverine looked at the wall where Conor and the others were hidden and growled. “I give you to the count of three. One ... two ... ”

Kovo roared and resumed his struggle against his chains. It was a momentary distraction, but it was all Xanthe needed. She broke away from the group, leaping out of the shadows toward Sid.

In the same instant Sid pulled another knife out from his belt and hurled it at Xanthe. The Sadrean warrior ducked but was tackled by another guard several feet before reaching Sid or Takoda.

But the knife Sid threw didn’t fall to the floor.

It hung in midair for a long moment, and then the whole team’s camouflage vanished, revealing their position near the back wall.

Conor turned and saw Anka, her short dark hair and cloak coming through in vibrant colors. She was completely visible, and she was clutching the knife's handle in front of her chest. A few drops of bright red blood were speckled across her shirt. Toey ran around her in a panic.

No one moved.

Not a Greencloak nor an Oathbound.

Even Sid seemed to be shocked by the apparition of the young Zhongese woman he'd just impaled.

Anka slowly pulled the knife away, revealing a growing red stain on her shirt. Her eyes dropped down to look at what the others were seeing. Stumbling, she tried to reach a table in the corner, but then her eyes locked with Meilin's.

"I'm sorry," she muttered before collapsing to the floor.

"ANKA!" Meilin cried out, but before she could run to her, Oathbound soldiers blocked her path.

"NO!" Sid yelled, pushing away the tied-up Takoda and grabbing Xanthe from the Oathbound guard. "No one move!" he yelled. "Or she also dies!"

Conor gripped the handle of his ax. One quick throw and he could lodge it into an Oathbound guard ... but then what? Sid held the ultimate card. He was holding Xanthe in a headlock, positioning her in front of him like a shield. He had the tip of his knife pressed against the pale skin of her neck, where a tiny bit of blood was already trickling out.

"Let her go!" Takoda pleaded, struggling against his ropes. "PLEASE! I'll tell you everything! Just let her go."

Kovo's chains clanged against the floor as he continued trying to get loose.

Sid took a step back, dragging Xanthe with him. "So you wouldn't do it for yourself or your fellow monks, but you'll do it for her?" He glared at Takoda as he pressed down on the knife. "Speak quickly, because I have already lost my patience."

"Don't ... " Xanthe's voice came out a hoarse whisper. She couldn't flinch or else her throat would be cut.

"The Dragon's Eye is in the catacombs underneath Xin Kao Dai." Takoda's words tumbled out. "Beneath the Summer Palace. That's all Tembo wrote. I don't know anything else."

"See?" Sid smiled and pulled the knife away from Xanthe's throat, but tightened his grip on her. "Wasn't that easy?"

Takoda's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Now, where's the gold?" Sid asked.

"There isn't any," Takoda muttered. "I told you before. The monks never had use for it."

"I don't believe you.... " Sid's eyes narrowed, trying to gauge Takoda's reaction. "But if that's true ... " He paused for a moment, smiling. "Then sadly, we have no use for her either."

With that Sid the Generous plunged the knife into Xanthe's stomach and pushed her to the ground.

"NOOOOOO!" Takoda's painful scream echoed throughout the Great Hall.

Xanthe gasped, trying to catch her breath. Her eyes were fixed on Takoda as she struggled to breathe.

Takoda wiggled his way across the floor to get closer to her, but there was nothing he could do as her eyes lost focus, closed. She stopped moving.

Takoda moaned, the noise echoing hopelessly in the expansive chamber. Hearing Takoda's raw grief, Conor felt his throat close.

"Xanthe!" Abeke cried out.

A chill ran down Conor's back.

They all feared the same thing.

Was Xanthe gone, too?



CAPTAIN

ROLLAN WAS IN SHOCK. HE COULDN'T BELIEVE HIS EYES. Takoda, his feet bound and his hands still tied behind his back, was kneeling next to Xanthe, whispering something to her as she lay motionless. Sid had killed Anka and possibly Xanthe with barely a second thought. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

This was not the way things were supposed to go.

"Surrender or face the consequences," Sid snarled. "Because there's no way out."

"We'll see about that," Rollan replied. He'd learned on the streets of Concorba that there was usually at least one means of escape. He noticed Kovo still jerking against his chains, the ape's red eyes shining with anger. If Rollan could make it over to him, he could release the lock and unleash five hundred pounds of gorilla fury upon the Oathbound.

Sid threw back his head and laughed. "The monastery is surrounded," he said. "The four of you are completely outnumbered. And you still think there's a way out?" He laughed again.

"Greencloaks, get ready!" Meilin called out, taking a defensive stance. Her sword gleamed in her hand.

"Uraza!" Abeke yelled, calling out to the Great Leopard.

"Briggan!" Conor held out his arm as the silver-gray wolf joined him.

The Greencloaks stood together in a semicircle, facing a dozen Oathbound, many with spirit animals of their own. Sid's wolverine was

already snarling, ready to face off against Briggan. A white tiger growled at Uraza.

“Jhi!” Meilin said, but her eyes were fixed on Xanthe lying on the floor. The girl was still breathing, but she was unconscious and bleeding out fast.

The large panda flashed onto the scene. Rollan knew Jhi would be a fierce fighter and improve Meilin’s own battle skills, but perhaps that wasn’t what the girl had in mind.

Still ... she’d need a distraction.

Rollan scanned the room, taking in the placement of every Oathbound, every monk, and every object in the room. Behind the anguished Takoda there were spears, shields, and swords hanging on the wall. If Rollan could free the monks and get them those weapons, their numbers would increase dramatically. Between them and Kovo, the Greencloaks might have a real chance.

Xanthe might have a chance.

Across the chamber, Master Naveb coughed. Rollan locked eyes with the old man just as Naveb quickly lifted the edge of his robe and revealed a key tied to his ankle. He gave Rollan a quick nod and motioned to Kovo. Naveb had the key to unlock Kovo’s chains!

“Fine.” Sid grinned cruelly. “You want to fight? We’ll fight.”

Rollan readied himself to sprint.

A screech from somewhere in the room caught everyone’s attention ... especially Rollan’s. It sounded like Essix. Rollan’s eyes flicked over to the closed window. How had the falcon gotten in, and where was she now?

Another screech, but something was off. Rollan glanced upward, where he saw a tiny black bird perched in the rafters. It was the same bird that had stolen his food out on the savannah! The drongo flew onto the shoulder of a girl with curly red hair. The Oathbound fished a snack from her pocket and gave it to her spirit animal, sneering at Rollan the whole time.

That little sneak. It had imitated Essix’s call.

Sid rolled his shoulders confidently and continued talking. “If you choose to fight us, all you’ll accomplish is more bloodshed ... your own. Surrender is your only option.”

Meilin scoffed. “Never.”

“You’ll just kill us anyway,” Conor added.

Abeke narrowed her eyes. "Once we're of no *use* to you."

"Now, now, friends," Rollan said, taking a small sideways step. If he could just get to Kovo, then Master Naveb would toss him the key. "Sid here seems like a smart guy. I mean, he obviously knew we were coming. I'm guessing a little bird told you."

Sid looked over at the drongo and chuckled. "Yes, Kasmira can be very useful."

This time the bird chirped like a nightingale in response.

Rollan took another step. "So you must also know that the Greencloaks have vast resources. We can make a person very wealthy."

"If it's more gold you want," Abeke said, catching on that Rollan had a plan of sorts, "we can always come to some type of arrangement." She began slowly moving away from the group in the opposite direction.

The Oathbound soldiers shifted, cautiously spreading out in order to remain in front of each Greencloak.

"Such as?" Sid asked as Conor took a couple steps forward.

"Gold, of course," Conor said. "And we know many influential people."

Rollan could see that Sid was interested. They just needed a little more time.

"I can't believe that you would offer him anything!" Takoda cried out from beside Xanthe. "Look what he did!"

"Hush, boy," Master Naveb scolded.

Rollan ignored Takoda's anguish and took another step closer to the window. "It would seem that you hold all the cards, so why don't you set the terms?"

Meilin lowered her sword, as if willing to entertain the idea as well. "Just tell us what you want."

Sid's expression changed as he stared at Meilin. The eager gleam was replaced by a rigid grimace. "There is nothing I want," he stated, his back straightening. It almost looked as if he were about to salute her. "My captain ... we await your orders."

Rollan was confused, but when he turned to look at Meilin, it was the person who was standing behind her who surprised him.

Anka.

Meilin spun around and came face-to-face with the Greencloak. Anka now had a knife pointed directly at Meilin. The same knife that had stabbed her. Her shirt was no longer stained with blood.

The truth dawned slowly on Rollan. The whole thing had been an illusion. Anka had actually caught the knife and used her chameleon ability to make it seem as if she'd been mortally wounded.

"Anka?" Meilin took a half step back. "What's going on?"

"Captain, I ... I'm glad you're not hurt." Sid's voice quavered. "I truly did not realize that—"

"Enough!" Anka stopped Sid's prattling with a wave of her hand. "Yes, Sid, your blindness has become painfully obvious. You didn't even realize that the old man has Kovo's key *in his hand*."

"I knew I didn't like you from the moment I couldn't see you," Master Naveb said.

"Oathbound," Anka called, "arrest them all!"

Each Greencloak took a defensive stance. They wouldn't go down without a fight. Rollan knew that the battle for their lives was about to begin.

Anka stared at Meilin. "Except for her. This one ... this one is mine."



HONEST FIGHT

MEILIN'S HEAD WAS SPINNING. SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE Anka had betrayed them ... that she'd apparently been working with the Oathbound all along. None of them had suspected her of being a spy.

"You seem so surprised," Anka said as she and Meilin circled each other. All around them, fighting had broken out between Greencloaks and Oathbound. Distantly, Meilin heard Abeke scream, but she didn't dare look away from the enemy facing her. "Did you think you were the only Zhongese girl to want more?"

"More what? More treachery?" Meilin turned the sword in her hand. "How could you, Anka? We were *friends*."

"It's nothing personal," the young woman said with a shrug. "Fate put us on different sides of this conflict. You win your battles through combat. I win in my own way. Plus, you're the one who told me: 'In a real battle for life and death, you shouldn't worry about what is and isn't fair.' "

Jhi barked urgently, a low, plaintive sound that cut through the noise of the hall. Meilin spared her spirit animal a quick glance and saw that Jhi was watching Xanthe with anxious eyes.

"She's lost a lot of blood," Anka said. "Probably just on the verge of death. So what will you do? Will you sacrifice your spirit animal's help? The last time we sparred without her, I nearly beat you."

Meilin glared. "Go, Jhi. I can handle the likes of *Anka*, myself."

The panda exploded into action, loping across the chamber toward Xanthe and Takoda.

Anka smirked. “Wrong call,” she crooned.

Meilin lunged at her with her sword, but Anka spun away, landing a kick against Meilin’s hip at the same time. “And since you bring it up ... my name isn’t really Anka. It’s Kana. Kana the Honest.”

Kana disappeared, her cloak dissolving into the background like mist burning away in the sun.

Meilin jabbed at the empty air around her, unsure of where Anka ... or Kana ... had gone.

Then she felt her legs being swept out from under her. Meilin fell back and slammed her skull against the hard floor.

Now her head *truly* spun. Meilin forced herself up, bracing her unsteady feet. She glanced nervously around her. In a fight where she couldn’t see her enemy, she had to trust her other senses.

A slight rustling sound told her what she needed to know. Meilin did a backward handspring and sliced through the air with her leg, making hard contact with the unseen Kana.

“Ugh!” Kana grunted.

Meilin struck again, landing a second kick. As she went for a third, she felt a sharp pain in her upper leg. She screamed, stumbling back and leaving a trail of blood in her wake.

Retreating to a corner of the room, Meilin held her sword in front of her. Her wound wasn’t serious, but it was too difficult to fight an invisible opponent. Kana could have cut an artery if she’d struck her in a different place.

“That was a warning,” Kana said, as if reading Meilin’s mind.

Meilin couldn’t believe Kana’s skill. She was a much better fighter than she’d pretended to be. Meilin could *not* underestimate her.

“You’ve learned a lot,” Meilin said, trying to find Kana’s location through her voice.

“Ha!” Kana’s laugh came from Meilin’s left. “You thought I was learning how to fight.... I was only learning how *you* fight.”

Meilin spun her sword in front of her like a protective barrier. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Conor fighting off three Oathbound warriors with his ax and a sword he’d picked up from somewhere.

“Things don’t have to be this way, Meilin.” Kana’s voice had switched sides, now coming from the right side of the room. “You could

join us. Work for me. I know how much you love Zhong. So did your father.”

“Leave my father out of this!” Meilin shouted, her eyes straining to see where the voice was coming from. But the only thing she saw were her friends, battling the Oathbound. Rollan defended against two attackers, giving Abeke cover as she shot arrows at some archers who were perched on the rafters. Uraza and Briggan were each tangled up under weighted nets that had been thrown over them.

Things weren’t looking good. Meilin needed to level the playing field. She *had* to defeat Kana.

“Think about it, Meilin,” Kana said. “Zhong needs more women like you. Strong and brave and unafraid to fight for what they believe in. It’s why I started the Oathbound. The military wouldn’t have me, so I formed my own company. The time of the Greencloaks is over, but you can still serve your nation.”

“You’re nothing but mercenaries,” Meilin snarled. “Without the Greencloaks, the nations will be at each other’s throats, and then who will you *serve*? The highest bidder? Being a Greencloak means recognizing that we’re all in this together. We all bleed the same. Helping others, wherever they are, is the right thing to do.”

Meilin caught sight of the large fireplace. An idea began to form. The ash could reveal Kana’s location. Make it easier to fight her.

“You still don’t understand,” Kana answered with a sigh. She was standing somewhere to Meilin’s right side.

Meilin didn’t waste any more time responding. She sprinted toward the fireplace, jumping over knocked-down chairs and beating down any Oathbound who dared to get in her way.

She grabbed a handful of ash and flung it in the air.

Kana coughed as the clouds of soot hit her. Meilin could see portions of the Oathbound spy outlined in the ash. Before Kana had a chance to camouflage herself again, Meilin tackled her, the two rolling onto the floor. Kana swiped at Meilin with her fists, but Meilin swiftly countered every one of Kana’s moves, then she hopped lightly to her feet.

Spinning in the air, Meilin swung her leg, leading with a strong roundhouse kick. But Kana was ready. She grabbed Meilin’s ankle, turned her leg, and slammed her down with a resounding thud. Before Meilin could roll away, Kana had the knife at her throat.

“So predictable,” Kana lamented. “I thought you’d be more creative.” She paused to glance over at the other Greencloaks, who were each being taken down. “But this is over. It all ends now.”



EXPENDABLE

ABEKE WAS DEVASTATED. THE GREENCLOAKS HAD PUT up a good fight, but they were outnumbered by a group that had been waiting for them for days. The Oathbound had exploited their every weakness, and now their fate was in Kana's hands.

All the monks had been taken away, including the heartbroken Takoda, who had to be carried out kicking and screaming when the Oathbound dragged Xanthe out of the hall. The Sadrean was alive, thanks to Jhi, but she hadn't woken up since being stabbed. When Abeke last glimpsed the girl, her already pale skin was nearly blue.

The only ones left in the Great Hall were Sid, Kana, and the four Greencloaks, who were sitting on the ground with their hands and legs tied.

"We're ready, Captain," Sid announced. He held a small blue bottle in his hand. "Do I knock them out?"

"I'm reconsidering sending them to Greenhaven to be tried with the other Greencloaks." Kana paced back and forth across the Great Hall. She was clearly visible to everyone.

Abeke noticed that now that Kana had shown her true colors, she no longer camouflaged herself as much.

"What? Why?" Sid glanced at Meilin before looking at Kana again. "Were you able to convince her to join us?"

"I'd never join you." Meilin spat out the words.

"None of us would," Rollan added.

Kana chuckled. "As if I'd accept any of you at this point." She walked over to Rollan and bent down in front of him. "Before we forget." She reached under his shirt and pulled out the Heart of the Land. She smiled as she slipped the chain over his head and put it around her own neck, tucking it under her collar.

Abeke could see the anger in Rollan's eyes. She'd felt the same way when her bag with Stormspeaker was taken away. They'd risked so much, lost so much, to get those two bond tokens, and now the Oathbound had them.

"So what are we doing with them?" Sid asked as Kana gazed out the window. "Cordelia will be waiting for them."

"Cordelia will just have to wait, then," Kana replied, watching the sunrise.

"Cordelia the Kind?" Abeke didn't want to get her hopes up too much, but if Cordelia had survived the cave-in, then maybe Worthy had, too. The Redcloaks might be able to help them somehow.

"Yes, but what's it to you?" Sid asked.

"They're worried about that heinous half-breed you captured," Kana explained, turning to face the group again. "The former Trunswick kid."

"So he's alive?" Conor asked.

"Yeah, yeah ... he's fine," Sid said. "Well, as fine as a mash-up of animal and human can ever be." Sid shuddered for dramatic effect.

"Go ahead and knock them out with the potion," Kana ordered. "That way we don't have to worry about any feeble attempts at escaping."

"I won't swallow that," Meilin declared, struggling with her ropes.

Kana cocked her head to the side. "Please, as if you have a say in the matter. Plus, this doesn't even involve you drinking it. We're much more sophisticated."

Sid opened up the bottle and poured a little on a handkerchief. "So they *are* going to Greenhaven?" He flashed a sinister smile as he stalked toward Conor. "This should be fun."

"No, they're not," Kana said. "You'll put them on our boat."

"To Xin Kao Dai?" Sid looked confused as he covered Conor's nose and mouth with the wet cloth.

"The catacombs there are riddled with deadly traps," Kana said. She watched impassively while Conor struggled against Sid's hands. "Better to have expendables like these four go in first, don't you think?"

Sid grinned as Conor stopped moving. The boy slumped to the side, unconscious.

“Who’s next?” he asked, eyeing Meilin.

“Leave her for last,” Kana said. “I want her to watch each one of her friends go down.”

Sid let out a big, strong laugh. He was enjoying this. He approached Abeke and poured a little more of the liquid from the blue bottle onto the cloth before covering her face with it.

Abeke held her breath, not wanting to breathe in whatever was on the handkerchief.

“Kana, stop this,” Meilin pleaded, trying with all her might to free herself. “The Greencloaks are innocent. You *know* we didn’t kill the emperor.”

“Oh, Meilin,” Kana said as Abeke tried in vain to move her face away from Sid’s powerful hands. “You really don’t know anything at all.”

And with those words, Abeke gasped for air and her entire world went dark.

Christina Diaz Gonzalez is the award-winning author of *Moving Target*, *Return Fire*, *The Red Umbrella*, and *A Thunderous Whisper*. Her books have received numerous honors and recognitions, including the Florida Book Award and the Nebraska Book Award, and have been named the American Library Association's Best Fiction for Young Adults, a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People, and the International Reading Association's Teachers' Choice. More information can be found at www.christinagonzalez.com.

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BOOK EIGHT

THE DRAGON'S EYE

Conor, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan are four young heroes who have dedicated their lives to fighting evil. They are Greencloaks, called from every corner of the world to defend Erdas. But now the Greencloaks lie broken. The order is imprisoned, and their legendary relics have been stolen.

Something huge and terrible is coming, and it plans to swallow the Greencloaks whole. If the four friends and their spirit animals are going to stop it, then they'll have to trust in their bonds.

They'll need to become more than just heroes:
They must become legends.

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A sneak peek of the next



Book Eight

The Dragon's Eye

By Sarwat Chadda



AT SEA

ROLLAN SHIFTED IN HIS HAMMOCK, VAINLY SEARCHING for sleep. The coarse sackcloth reeked, but it was better than being on the floor, where a film of seawater layered the wood and a company of rats nibbled at bare toes or exposed ears.

The ship's cramped brig had only one porthole—closed and on the far side of the corridor—so there was little ventilation. The air tasted stale and stifling, laden with the stink of too many days at sea.

The old wooden hull of the Oathbound schooner groaned against the weight of the waves. Then there were more sounds: a hiss, a crack, a scream.

“She’s at it again,” declared Conor.

Reluctantly, Rollan opened his eyes. He squinted until they adjusted to the permanent gloom of the cell, and then he saw his friends.

Conor slouched up against the bars, his arms hanging through the rusty iron, head tilted to the noise above.

He winced at the next scream.

Rollan rolled out of the hammock and past Abeke, who’d been woken by the cries echoing from above. She gritted her teeth. “It’s Cordelia ...” she said. “Cordelia *the Kind*.”

Meilin joined Conor by the bars, and flinched at the third cry, louder and sharper than before. “That poor man.”

“There’ll be no one to sail this ship if she carries on like this.”

“What do you think he did?” asked Abeke.

Rollan shrugged. “He doesn’t need to have *done* anything.”

He thought back to their capture at the Niloan library, Maktaba. They’d been searching for the legendary bond token, Stormspeaker. They’d teamed up with Takoda and Xanthe, only to be betrayed—and captured—once they’d succeeded in gaining the token.

Takoda and Xanthe were chained and bundled on a ship to Greenhaven, while Rollan and his friends were headed to Zhong.

Conor glanced over at the scratches he’d been making on the wall. There were fifteen.

There was another hiss and cry, but now reduced to a pitiful whimper.

Fifteen days trapped down here. Fifteen days of hearing the cruel hiss of the whip and the cries of whatever poor unfortunate Cordelia had picked to torment, if for no other reason than that she could.

Why not them? She hated Rollan and his companions, yet Cordelia never chose to vent her cruelty on any of them. But sooner or later she’d grow bored of whipping sailors ...

Then she’d come down here and start on the prisoners.

Maybe she wouldn’t begin with them.

The weary weeks at sea hadn’t been spent totally alone. The Oathbound were bounty hunters, and clearly business was good.

Hunting Greencloaks seemed to pay well. The cell next to theirs held three more. They’d been brought on board a few days ago, and the news was grim.

Rollan knocked on the wall between them. “You awake, Kofe?”

There was a grunt and a return knock. Then a cough. “Of course. How can anyone sleep with what’s going on up there?”

“Where were we?” asked Rollan.

Kofe laughed. It was a generous belly-rumble and Rollan felt it through the wood. “Best meal you’ve ever had. Mine was a squirrel. Cooked on a spit, out in the woods west of Greenhaven.”

“Doesn’t sound so special.”

“I was real hungry, boy. Sitting out under the moon, quiet as you like. Nothing in the world but me and Sniffler.”

Sniffler made his presence known with a squeak. Unlike everyone else here, the rat was quite at home in the hull.

Alongside Kofe was Lady Cranston, a distant relative to the Trunswicks, and Salaman, from northern Nilo. The three Greencloaks

knew of Rollan and his friends, of course, and it was reassuring to have them on board, even if they were prisoners.

“You think they’ve caught everyone?” asked Rollan.

“Looking to get rescued?” Kofe replied. He sighed. “Who knows? The Oathbound have been planning this for a long time. The only reason we weren’t caught sooner was because we were on a mission, far from Greenhaven. We won’t be the only ones. There’ll be Greencloaks hiding out, but with Olvan and Lenori captured, it’s not looking good. We’re on our own, boy.”

On our own. Rollan was used to that.

Wasn’t it supposed to be different? He was a Greencloak. The ancient order had allies everywhere, yet it had been taken down in a matter of months.

But some things rot from within.

Imposters had gotten themselves recruited into the Greencloaks. They’d learned its secrets, dug out its weaknesses. They’d publicly murdered the Emperor of Zhong while wearing the uniform, right as the Greencloaks were at their most vulnerable. When the blow came, the Greencloaks were swiftly blamed and imprisoned.

Imprisoned, like now.

There was one escape, however.

Rollan closed his eyes. It was getting easier and easier, connecting to Essix. She hadn’t been captured with the other Greencloaks in Nilo, and was tailing the boat to see where they went.

Rollan closed his eyes and he was there with her, following their ship. His heart jumped as he soared amongst the clouds. The wind roared in his ears, buffeting Essix’s sleek body. Or was it his? Now they were one and the same.

Essix cried out as she spun downward, piercing through a flock of panicked seagulls. Rollan laughed to see them break formation as they squawked in outrage. Essix merely flicked her wing tips and darted off.

This was pure freedom. His mind knew it was a fiction—he was trapped in the smelly belly of a ship—but his heart was filled with such joy that his chest swelled to bursting.

And pride. What animal could compare to Essix? Greatest of the Great Beasts!

He’d struggled, back when she’d first come into his life. He’d watched with jealousy at the way Meilin commanded Jhi, and the close,

instinctive bond between Conor and Briggan.

As a street orphan he'd never owned anything valuable. Then he'd been given a Great Beast, one of the Four Fallen. Was it any wonder he'd struggled to understand such a gift?

He'd known people back in Concorba who'd been like him and struck it lucky. Most had squandered their good fortune and ended up back where they'd started sooner than they imagined.

Sure, he'd come close. Planning to run away from Greenhaven the first chance he'd gotten. Refusing to join until Tarik's death.

Sticking to his friends had taken a lot of courage, more than he'd imagined.

He could picture Greenhaven now. The towers and the surrounding sea of grass. The woods and the stables and the banners fluttering from the battlements.

He'd seen it through Essix's eyes, too. Many times, as they honed their bond together. Rollan had glided through the treetops as she accelerated toward the castle. The trees crowded around her, him, them, but she was too swift, too cunning to be trapped amongst the branches and boughs.

"Fly, boy, fly! Fly away if you can!"

Rollan snapped his eyes open.

"Wheeee!"

He ran to the cell door. "Will you shut up?"

"Ignore him," suggested Abeke.

"Wheee! Flap, flap, flap in the sky!"

The Greencloaks weren't the only prisoners down here. There was one other.

The mad old man.

As he was Zhongese, Meilin had tried talking to him at the beginning. The man ignored her, staring and mumbling and occasionally laughing wildly. The sailors found him amusing but Rollan just wondered why he was here.

Even now he was peering through the bars, whispering to himself. He caught Rollan's gaze and then beat his arms in the air, laughing as he flapped around the small cell of his.

"I'll be like that if I don't get out of here soon," complained Conor.

The hatch at the far end of the narrow corridor opened.

A column of light lit the ladder and a small diameter at the foot of it. Rollan's eyes watered; it was the first true sunlight he'd seen in days. Voices spoke and a couple of shadows passed at the hatch opening. One of them a woman.

Rollan clenched his fists. Maybe today was the day Cordelia came for him. He wouldn't go without a fight. A quick glance at his companions and he saw the same defiance.

But it wasn't Cordelia the Kind who descended into the semidarkness of the ship's hold.

It was Kana.

Once, they'd called her Anka. Rollan and the others had thought she was a Greencloak. A friend. But that had all been lie, right from the very beginning. In reality, she was the *captain* of the Oathbound, the mercenaries who had relentlessly pursued them. And like all high-ranking Oathbound, she carried a title that belied her true nature: Kana the Honest.

Unlike the others, however, Kana wore only a simple black uniform, dispensing with the usual brass collar and wrist guards.

All the better to hide in, Rollan thought despondently.

The traitor wrinkled her nose at the dank odors that hung in the uttermost depths of the hull. Almost daintily, she kicked aside a rat that had dared to come sniffing at her boot. Using the tip of her staff, she pushed open the porthole, and Rollan felt the sudden gust of fresh air.

Someone from above passed a lantern down to Kana and she raised it ahead of her. When its glow fell on them, all gathered at the cell bars. She smiled with cold satisfaction. "You've made yourselves at home, I see."

"There's room enough for you," said Conor. "Why don't you come in?"

Kana stepped closer, using her lantern to inspect their cell, but well out of reach of any sudden lunges. "Your journey is almost over. We're near the coast of Zhong and will be coming into dock by sunset." Kana smiled. "You have a friend who's eager to see you."

Rollan frowned. "A friend like Cordelia?"

"Cordelia can be unruly, I admit that," the woman said with a frown. "You should appreciate how hard it's been to stop her from coming down here and expressing her ... enthusiasm upon any of you."

"You didn't stop her from torturing the sailors," Rollan said.

Kana's response was a shrug. Apparently the pain of a few nameless sailors meant nothing to her.

How had they gotten themselves into this mess?

Rollan met Kana's gaze. "What about Worthy? Cordelia got out. So what did you do with *him*?"

Kana's eyebrows raised a hair, though her face remained otherwise still. "You won't be seeing him again."

Rollan didn't want to believe that. He glanced over at Conor. The two boys had grown up together. Conor was once Worthy's servant, back when the Redcloak went by Devin Trunswick. Worthy had come a long way from the obnoxious noble he was to become their ally, and friend. Together they'd found an ancient artifact in Eura, a sword named the Wildcat's Claw. Worthy had tried his best to prevent it from falling into the hands of Cordelia and the Oathbound, by bringing down the tomb where the sword had been hidden.

But the Oathbound had managed to retrieve the blade out of the collapsed wreckage.

It was now in Cordelia's hands. Rollan couldn't think of anything worse.

Who was he kidding? Of course he could. Easily.

Most of the ancient Greencloak gifts were now in the possession of Kana's mercenaries. They had the Claw, the Heart of the Land amulet, and the legendary Stormspeaker crown.

Only the Dragon's Eye remained ...

And there was no one left to stop them. With Rollan and his friends locked up here and the Greencloaks imprisoned in Greenhaven, the Oathbound were unstoppable.

Rollan and the others glanced up as they heard a heavy thump from the deck. The screaming abruptly stopped.

"Sounds like Cordelia's had her fun." Kana turned back toward the ladder. "The adventure is almost over, children."

The hatch slammed shut once she left, and Rollan heard the rattle of a bolt being shoved in place.

Conor shook the bars. "We've got to do something!"

Abeke put her hand on Conor's shoulder. "Save your strength. We may get our chance yet."

"But what if we don't?"

The breeze from the opened porthole was feeble, but Rollan appreciated it nevertheless. Seagulls squawked somewhere outside. Rollan knew that meant they were nearing land.

Who was waiting for them in Zhong? The Oathbound were mercenaries, but they'd long been in the employ of the various governments of Erdas. Rollan had a sinking feeling.

The only person he could think of was Princess Song, daughter to the emperor. The last time they'd seen her was following her father's death, shocked and heartbroken. Though once a supporter of the Greencloaks, it was ultimately Song who'd ordered their arrest.

Rollan peered closer at the small circle of light ahead. "She left the porthole open."

Meilin looked up. "It's too small, even if we could reach it."

Rollan smiled. "Too small for us. But not Essix. She's been following us since Nilo."

"But what can Essix do for us now?" asked Conor.

"Warn Greenhaven. The Greencloaks may be prisoners, but they're the only allies we've got. Maybe she can lead someone back to us."

Rollan whistled, just hoping the hatch was thick enough to muffle the sound. After a long, tense moment, no Oathbound goons had come to check on them ... but a shadow darkened the porthole.

A large gyrfalcon peered inside. The falcon shook out her wings and began preening herself.

"We don't have time for this, Essix." Rollan held his hand through the bars, toward the open porthole. Clutched between his fingers was a note, scratched on a scrap of leather he'd torn from his boot. "D'you think you can reach that?"

Essix let out a small cry, then shot into cabin. She'd snatched up the scrap of leather in a blink, landing on the floorboards just outside the cage.

Abeke grinned. "I think that's a yes."

Rollan smiled, kneeling and taking the scrap back. "Probably easier if you don't have to carry it in your mouth while you fly."

He rolled the cutting around Essix's leg, then tied it tightly with a second thin strip of leather. Rollan looked into the falcon's bright eyes. "This will tell whoever you can find that we're back in Zhong, and that the Oathbound have three of the relics."

Essix bobbed her head a few times then sprang into the air. It took a single beat and she darted through the narrow opening.

The image rushed unbidden and uncontrolled through Rollan's mind.

He felt himself darting over the waves. Looking through Essix's own eyes, he was startled to see her looking at him, a small face craning at the light shining through the open porthole.

He marvelled at the sharpness of her vision, the clarity with which she saw the world. The colors were brighter, everything more defined, sharper. The dimming sunlight catching the sea spray as waves were thrown up against the glistening hull. The water droplets shone like rubies, momentarily frozen between rising and falling, then merged again with the sea.

Rollan stumbled and Conor caught him, setting himself back onto his feet. The boy looked at him quizzically. "You all right?"

Rollan glimpsed her swooping over the waves. Then Essix tilted vertically upward and was gone.

He turned back and was met by three expectant faces. "It'll take a day or two to reach Greenhaven and, even if help is coming, it'll be a while before it arrives."

Meilin sighed. "So we're on our own?"

Rollan shrugged, trying to project some confidence. "What's new?"

Sudden shouts drew their attention back to the ship, rather than the fleeing bird.

Rollan's heart quickened with dread. "You think Cordelia's starting on another one?"

Bare feet scurried upon the wooden boards above. The shouts weren't cries of pain, but commands. The ship creaked as the rudder turned against the direction of the waves.

"No," replied Meilin. "We're coming into port."

The sailors knew their business. They were clearly hurrying around the main deck, despite the presence of the terrifying Cordelia, or perhaps because of it.

It was only minutes later that the chains of the anchors rattled free. Rollan could hear them splashing loudly into the water. Ropes hissed through the air and the ship buffeted again and again as the pilot worked to bring it against the quayside.

The hatch opened up. This time it was Cordelia.

The toes of her boots were sprinkled with blood.

Three sailors came in with her, one with manacles and the rest with swords drawn. Cordelia herself held the Wildcat's Claw, her gloved hand constantly clenching and unclenching around its hilt.

Rollan met her gaze. "I hope you're taking good care of that sword. We'll be wanting it back soon."

Cordelia drew it out by a few inches, just enough for the torchlight to catch its bright silvery edge. "Feel free to try and take it off me."

She wants an excuse to use it.

He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. For now. But sooner or later, a chance might come up ...

One by one, the sailors manacled the Greencloaks. Cordelia glanced impatiently over her shoulder the whole time.

Climbing out of the hull wasn't easy with his hands bound, but Rollan managed. He blinked as the sunlight assailed him.

It took a few moments for his eyes to get used to it. They'd been held in the gloom for weeks and the sky was dazzling, even at evening time.

The others were equally stunned. But eventually sight returned.

They were in a natural crescent bay with high cliffs on three sides and the sea at their backs. The docks were lined with Zhongese soldiers. Apart from their vessel, there were only two other ships, much smaller, and a cluster of rowboats bobbing in the waves. Steps, cut into the natural rock, zigzagged their way up.

An elegant palace dominated the top of the cliffs. It was long and sinewy in design, with a suspended platform at the very tip of the crescent.

"It's ... beautiful," breathed Rollan.

"Xin Kao Dai," said Meilin, with a note of sadness. "The emperor's Summer Palace."



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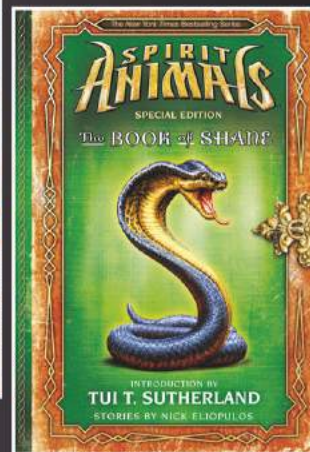
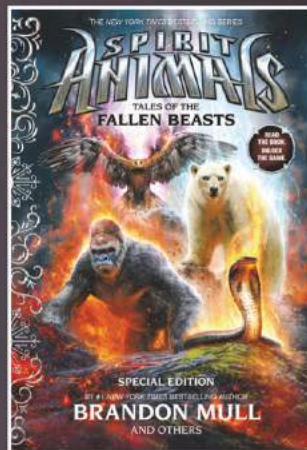
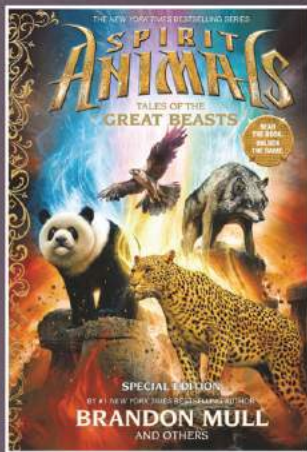


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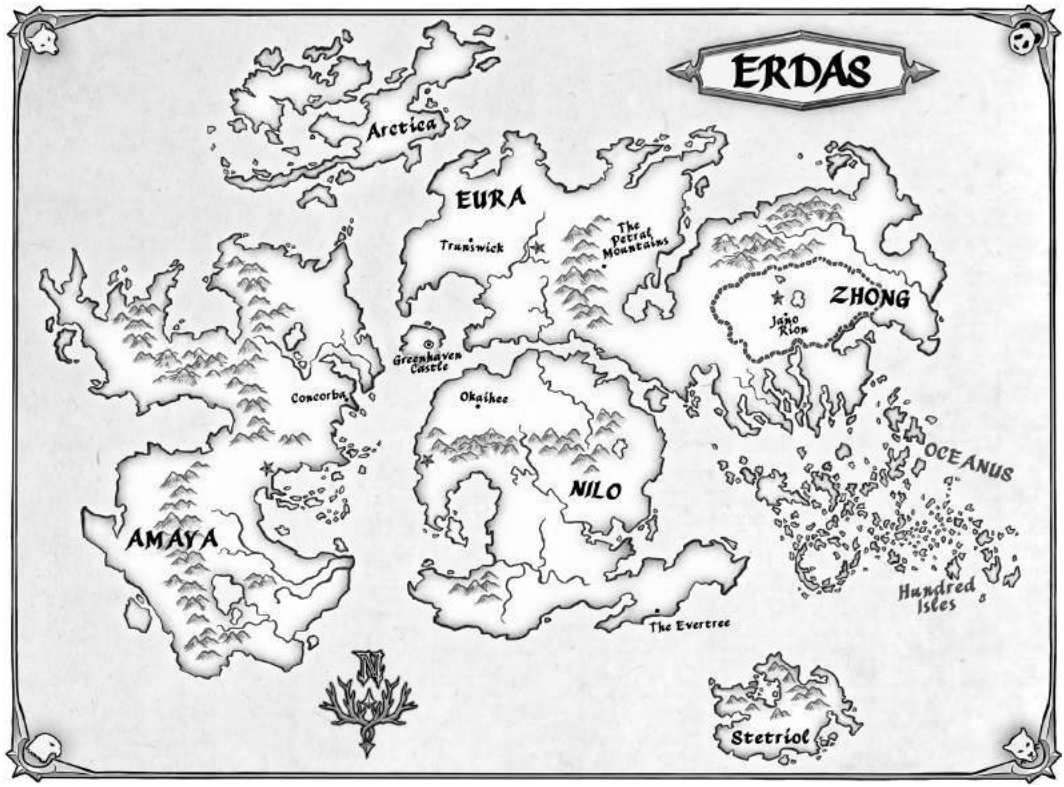


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To my girls—SC

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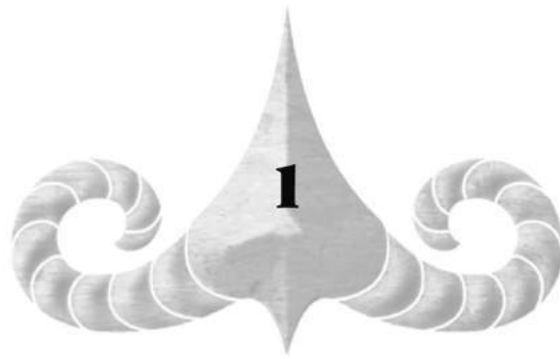
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AT SEA

ROLLAN SHIFTED IN HIS HAMMOCK, VAINLY SEARCHING for sleep. The coarse sackcloth reeked, but it was better than being on the floor, where a film of seawater layered the wood and a company of rats nibbled at bare toes or exposed ears.

The ship's cramped brig had only one porthole—closed and on the far side of the corridor—so there was little ventilation. The air tasted stale and stifling, laden with the stink of too many days at sea.

The old wooden hull of the Oathbound schooner groaned against the weight of the waves. Then there were more sounds: a hiss, a crack, a scream.

“She’s at it again,” declared Conor.

Reluctantly, Rollan opened his eyes. He squinted until they adjusted to the permanent gloom of the cell, and then he saw his friends.

Conor slouched up against the bars, his arms hanging through the rusty iron, head tilted to the noise above.

He winced at the next scream.

Rollan rolled out of the hammock and past Abeke, who’d been woken by the cries echoing from above. She gritted her teeth. “It’s Cordelia ...” she said. “Cordelia *the Kind*.”

Meilin joined Conor by the bars and flinched at the third cry, louder and sharper than before. “That poor man.”

“There’ll be no one to sail this ship if she carries on like this,” said Rollan.

“What do you think he did?” asked Abeke.

Rollan shrugged. “He doesn’t need to have *done* anything.”

He thought back to their capture at the Niloan library, Maktaba. They’d been searching for the legendary bond token, Stormspeaker. They’d teamed up with Takoda and Xanthe, only to be betrayed—and captured—once they’d succeeded in gaining the token.

Takoda and Xanthe were chained and bundled on a ship to Greenhaven, while Rollan and his friends were headed to Zhong.

Conor glanced over at the scratches he’d been making on the wall. There were fifteen.

There was another hiss and cry, but now reduced to a pitiful whimper.

Fifteen days trapped down here. Fifteen days of hearing the cruel hiss of the whip and the cries of whatever poor unfortunate Cordelia had picked to torment, if no other reason than that she could.

Why not them? She hated Rollan and his companions, yet Cordelia never chose to vent her cruelty on any of them. But sooner or later she’d grow bored of whipping sailors....

Then she’d come down here and start on the prisoners.

Maybe she wouldn’t begin with them.

The weary weeks at sea hadn’t been spent totally alone. The Oathbound were bounty hunters, and clearly business was good.

Hunting Greencloaks seemed to pay well. The cell next to theirs held three more. They’d been brought on board a few days ago, and the news was grim.

Rollan knocked on the wall between them. “You awake, Kofe?”

There was a grunt and a return knock. Then a cough. “Of course. How can anyone sleep with what’s going on up there?”

“Where were we?” asked Rollan.

Kofe laughed. It was a generous belly rumble and Rollan felt it through the wood. “Best meal you’ve ever had. Mine was a squirrel. Cooked on a spit, out in the woods west of Greenhaven.”

“Doesn’t sound so special.”

“I was real hungry, boy. Sitting out under the moon, quiet as you like. Nothing in the world but me and Sniffler.”

Sniffler made his presence known with a squeak. Unlike everyone else here, the rat was quite at home in the hull.

Alongside Kofe was Lady Cranston, a distant relative to the Trunswicks, and Salaman, from northern Nilo. The three Greencloaks

knew of Rollan and his friends, of course, and it was reassuring to have them on board, even if they were prisoners.

“You think they’ve caught everyone?” asked Rollan.

“Looking to get rescued?” Kofe replied. He sighed. “Who knows? The Oathbound have been planning this for a long time. The only reason we weren’t caught sooner was because we were on a mission, far from Greenhaven. We won’t be the only ones. There’ll be Greencloaks hiding out, but with Olvan and Lenori captured, it’s not looking good. We’re on our own, boy.”

On our own. Rollan was used to that.

Wasn’t it supposed to be different? He was a Greencloak. The ancient order had allies everywhere, yet it had been taken down in a matter of months.

But some things rot from within.

Impostors had gotten themselves recruited into the Greencloaks. They’d learned its secrets, dug out its weaknesses. They’d publicly murdered the Emperor of Zhong while wearing the uniform, right as the Greencloaks were at their most vulnerable. When the blow came, the Greencloaks were swiftly blamed and imprisoned.

Imprisoned, like now.

There was one escape, however.

Rollan closed his eyes. It was getting easier and easier, connecting to Essix. She hadn’t been captured with the other Greencloaks in Nilo, and was tailing the boat to see where they went.

Soon he was there with her, following their ship. His heart jumped as he soared among the clouds. The wind roared in his ears, buffeting Essix’s sleek body. Or was it his? Now they were one and the same.

Essix cried out as she spun downward, piercing through a flock of panicked seagulls. Rollan laughed to see them break formation as they squawked in outrage. Essix merely flicked her wing tips and darted off.

This was pure freedom. His mind knew it was a fiction—he was trapped in the smelly belly of a ship—but his heart was filled with such joy that his chest swelled to bursting.

And pride. What animal could compare to Essix? Greatest of the Great Beasts!

He’d struggled, back when she’d first come into his life. He’d watched with jealousy at the way Meilin commanded Jhi, and the close, instinctive bond between Conor and Briggan.

As a street orphan he'd never owned anything valuable. Then he'd been given a Great Beast, one of the Four Fallen. Was it any wonder he'd struggled to understand such a gift?

He'd known people back in Concorba who'd been like him and struck it lucky. Most had squandered their good fortune and ended up back where they'd started sooner than they imagined.

Sure, he'd come close. Planning to run away from Greenhaven the first chance he'd gotten. Refusing to join until Tarik's death.

Sticking to his friends had taken a lot of courage, more than he'd imagined.

He could picture Greenhaven now. The towers and the surrounding sea of grass. The woods and the stables, and the banners fluttering from the battlements.

He'd seen it through Essix's eyes, too. Many times, as they honed their bond together. Rollan had glided through the treetops as she accelerated toward the castle. The trees crowded around her, him, them, but she was too swift, too cunning to be trapped among the branches and boughs.

"Fly, boy, fly! Fly away if you can!"

Rollan snapped his eyes open.

"Wheeee!"

He ran to the cell door. "Will you shut up?"

"Ignore him," suggested Abeke.

"Wheee! Flap, flap, flap in the sky!"

The Greencloaks weren't the only prisoners down here. There was one other.

The mad old man.

As he was Zhongese, Meilin had tried talking to him at the beginning. The man ignored her, staring and mumbling and occasionally laughing wildly. The sailors found him amusing, but Rollan just wondered why he was here.

Even now he was peering through the bars, whispering to himself. He caught Rollan's gaze and then beat his arms in the air, laughing as he flapped around his small cell.

"I'll be like that if I don't get out of here soon," complained Conor.

The hatch at the far end of the narrow corridor opened.

A column of light lit the ladder and a small diameter at the foot of it. Rollan's eyes watered; it was the first true sunlight he'd seen in days.

Voices spoke and a couple of shadows passed at the hatch opening. One of them was a woman's.

Rollan clenched his fists. Maybe today was the day Cordelia came for him. He wouldn't go without a fight. A quick glance at his companions and he saw the same defiance.

But it wasn't Cordelia the Kind who descended into the semidarkness of the ship's hold.

It was Kana.

Once, they'd called her Anka. Rollan and the others had thought she was a Greencloak. A friend. But that had all been a lie, right from the very beginning. In reality, she was the *captain* of the Oathbound, the mercenaries who had relentlessly pursued them. And like all high-ranking Oathbound, she carried a title that belied her true nature: Kana the Honest.

Unlike the others, however, Kana wore only a simple black uniform, dispensing with the usual brass collar and wrist guards.

All the better to hide in, Rollan thought despondently.

The traitor wrinkled her nose at the dank odors that hung in the uttermost depths of the hull. Almost daintily, she kicked aside a rat that had dared to come sniffing at her boot. Using the tip of her staff, she pushed open the porthole, and Rollan felt the sudden gust of fresh air.

Someone from above passed a lantern down to Kana, and she raised it ahead of her. When its glow fell on them, all gathered at the cell bars. She smiled with cold satisfaction. "You've made yourselves at home, I see."

"There's room enough for you," said Conor. "Why don't you come in?"

Kana stepped closer, using her lantern to inspect their cell, but well out of reach of any sudden lunges. "Your journey is almost over. We're near the coast of Zhong and will be coming into dock by sunset." Kana smiled. "You have a friend who's eager to see you."

Rollan frowned. "A friend like Cordelia?"

"Cordelia can be unruly, I admit that," the woman said with a sigh. "You should appreciate how hard it's been to stop her from coming down here and expressing her ... enthusiasm upon any of you."

"You didn't stop her from torturing the sailors," Rollan said.

Kana's response was a shrug. Apparently the pain of a few nameless sailors meant nothing to her.

How had they gotten themselves into this mess?

Rollan met Kana's gaze. "What about Worthy? Cordelia got out. So what did you do with *him*?"

Kana's eyebrows raised a hair, though her face remained otherwise still. "You won't be seeing him again."

Rollan didn't want to believe that. He glanced over at Conor. The two boys had grown up together. Conor was once Worthy's servant, back when the Redcloak went by Devin Trunswick. Worthy had come a long way from the obnoxious noble to become their ally and friend. Together they'd found an ancient artifact in Eura, a sword named the Wildcat's Claw. Worthy had tried his best to prevent it from falling into the hands of Cordelia and the Oathbound by bringing down the tomb where the sword had been hidden.

But the Oathbound had managed to retrieve the blade out of the collapsed wreckage.

It was now in Cordelia's hands. Rollan couldn't think of anything worse.

Who was he kidding? Of course he could. Easily.

Most of the ancient Greencloak gifts were now in the possession of Kana's mercenaries. They had the Claw, the Heart of the Land amulet, and the legendary Stormspeaker crown.

Only the Dragon's Eye remained ...

And there was no one left to stop them. With Rollan and his friends locked up here and the Greencloaks imprisoned in Greenhaven, the Oathbound were unstoppable.

Rollan and the others glanced up as they heard a heavy thump from the deck. The screaming abruptly stopped.

"Sounds like Cordelia's had her fun." Kana turned back toward the ladder. "The adventure is almost over, children."

The hatch slammed shut once she left, and Rollan heard the rattle of a bolt being shoved in place.

Conor shook the bars. "We've got to do something!"

Abeke put her hand on Conor's shoulder. "Save your strength. We may get our chance yet."

"But what if we don't?"

The breeze from the opened porthole was feeble, but Rollan appreciated it nevertheless. Seagulls squawked somewhere outside. Rollan knew that meant they were nearing land.

Who was waiting for them in Zhong? The Oathbound were mercenaries, but they'd long been in the employ of the various governments of Erdas. Rollan had a sinking feeling.

The only person he could think of was Princess Song, daughter to the emperor. The last time they'd seen her was following her father's death, shocked and heartbroken. Though once a supporter of the Greencloaks, it was ultimately Song who'd ordered their arrest.

Rollan peered closer at the small circle of light ahead. "She left the porthole open."

Meilin looked up. "It's too small, even if we could reach it."

Rollan smiled. "Too small for us. But not Essix. She's been following us since Nilo."

"But what can Essix do for us now?" asked Conor.

"Warn Greenhaven. The Greencloaks may be prisoners, but they're the only allies we've got. Maybe she can lead someone back to us."

Rollan whistled, just hoping the hatch was thick enough to muffle the sound. After a long, tense moment, no Oathbound goons had come to check on them ... but a shadow darkened the porthole.

A large gyrfalcon peered inside. The falcon shook out her wings and began preening herself.

"We don't have time for this, Essix." Rollan held his hand through the bars, toward the open porthole. Clutched between his fingers was a note, scratched on a scrap of leather he'd torn from his boot. "D'you think you can reach that?"

Essix let out a small cry, then shot into the cabin. She'd snatched up the scrap of leather in a blink, landing on the floorboards just outside the cage.

Abeke grinned. "I think that's a yes."

Rollan smiled, kneeling and taking the scrap back. "Probably easier if you don't have to carry it in your mouth while you fly."

He rolled the cutting around Essix's leg, then tied it tightly with a second thin strip of leather. Rollan looked into the falcon's bright eyes. "This will tell whoever you can find that we're back in Zhong, and that the Oathbound have three of the relics."

Essix bobbed her head a few times then sprang into the air. It took a single beat, and she darted through the narrow opening.

The image rushed unbidden and uncontrolled through Rollan's mind.

He felt himself soaring over the waves. Looking through Essix's own eyes, he was startled to see her looking at him, a small face craning at the light shining through the open porthole.

He marveled at the sharpness of her vision, the clarity with which she saw the world. The colors were brighter, everything more defined, sharper. The dimming sunlight catching the sea spray as waves were thrown up against the glistening hull. The water droplets shone like rubies, momentarily frozen between rising and falling, then merged again with the sea.

Rollan stumbled and Conor caught him, setting him back onto his feet. The boy looked at him quizzically. "You all right?"

Rollan glimpsed her swooping over the waves. Then Essix tilted vertically upward and was gone.

He turned back and was met by three expectant faces. "It'll take a day or two to reach Greenhaven and, even if help is coming, it'll be a while before it arrives."

Meilin sighed. "So we're on our own?"

Rollan shrugged, trying to project some confidence. "What's new?"

Sudden shouts drew their attention back to the ship, rather than the fleeing bird.

Rollan's heart quickened with dread. "You think Cordelia's starting on another one?"

Bare feet scurried upon the wooden boards above. The shouts weren't cries of pain, but commands. The ship creaked as the rudder turned against the direction of the waves.

"No," replied Meilin. "We're coming into port."

The sailors knew their business. They were clearly hurrying around the main deck, despite the presence of the terrifying Cordelia, or perhaps because of it.

It was only minutes later that the chains of the anchors rattled free. Rollan could hear them splashing loudly into the water. Ropes hissed through the air and the ship buffeted again and again as the pilot worked to bring it against the quayside.

The hatch opened up. This time it was Cordelia.

Her boots were sprinkled with blood.

Three sailors came in with her, one in manacles and the rest with swords drawn. Cordelia herself held the Wildcat's Claw, her gloved hand constantly clenching and unclenching around its hilt.

Rollan met her gaze. “I hope you’re taking good care of that sword. We’ll be wanting it back soon.”

Cordelia drew it out by a few inches, just enough for the torchlight to catch its bright silvery edge. “Feel free to try and take it off me.”

She wants an excuse to use it.

He wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. For now. But sooner or later, a chance might come up....

One by one, the sailors manacled the Greencloaks. Cordelia glanced impatiently over her shoulder the whole time.

Climbing out of the hull wasn’t easy with his hands bound, but Rollan managed. He blinked as the sunlight assailed him.

It took a few moments for his eyes to get used to it. They’d been held in the gloom for weeks and the sky was dazzling, even at evening time.

The others were equally stunned. But eventually sight returned.

They were in a natural crescent bay with high cliffs on three sides and the sea at their backs. The docks were lined with Zhongese soldiers. Apart from their vessel, there were only two other ships, much smaller, and a cluster of rowboats bobbing in the waves. Steps, cut into the natural rock, zigzagged their way up.

An elegant palace dominated the top of the cliffs. It was long and sinewy in design, with a suspended platform at the very tip of the crescent.

“It’s ... beautiful,” breathed Rollan.

“Xin Kao Dai,” said Meilin, with a note of sadness. “The emperor’s Summer Palace.”



THE SUMMER PALACE

CORDELIA SHOVED CONOR ALONG THE GANGPLANK. “Get a move on.”
Conor spun to her, a snarl on his lips. “I go at my own pace.”

Cordelia bristled. She wore more armor than the usual brass cuffs and collars of the Oathbound uniform. Her boots had brass shin guards, and plates were strapped to her thighs. A heavy mail covered her from shoulders to below her waist.

There was a nervous, unstable twitch in the way she gripped Wildcat’s Claw, but Conor had spent too long cooped up in a cell. He’d grown up a shepherd, used to the free sky overhead and grass underfoot. He’d taken his imprisonment even worse than the rest of his friends.

If Cordelia wanted a fight, he was happy to give it to her, chains or no chains.

Kana stepped between them. She narrowed her eyes at Conor. “We have a problem here?”

Meilin touched her hand to Conor’s arm. “Now’s not the time,” she whispered.

So the four of them marched off the ship and onto the docks.

The three adult Greencloaks were behind them, then came the crazy old man. He hobbled bowlegged down the gangplank, his scrawny limbs wrapped in chains. It was almost comical how weighed down he was, considering he appeared to be the feeblest of any of them. The man bit his beard and winced as he trod over the pebbles, then looked pitifully over at Conor. “My feet hurt.”

“Should have worn some sandals, then.”

The man looked up at the palace. “How about a piggyback?”

“All the way up? I might drop you.”

Kofe shrugged. “I’ll carry you, old man. Just don’t wriggle.”

Conor hadn’t gotten a good look at his fellow Greencloaks, not until now. Kofe was just like he sounded, big. The man’s beard was threaded with gray, but he was muscular, a born survivor judging by the scars. Conor knew the type, old shepherds who’d slept outdoors through sun and snow, their skin wrinkled like old leather and just as tough.

Lady Cranston was *not* how he’d expected. Her voice had been soft, cultured, and full of clever words. He’d had an image of a tall, delicate noblewoman wearing furs and silks. Instead he saw a middle-aged woman in a heavy tunic with well-worn boots and a face as hard as flint. Those blue eyes of her shone with swift thoughts. She hooked her fingers in her belt, despite the chains, and Conor got the firm impression those chains wouldn’t handicap her much if it came to a fight.

The third of their trio, Salaman, made him think of Tarik. Conor shot Rollan a glance. By the look in Rollan’s eyes, Conor suspected he was thinking the same thing.

Salaman was dusky and lean. He looked years older than the rest, and the others weren’t young. His beard was pure white, though short and neat. The old man didn’t appear withered by his years, rather the opposite. It seemed age had merely shorn him of any weakness.

If Tarik had had an older brother, Conor reckoned he would have looked a lot like Salaman.

The three elder Greencloaks had an ease around each other. They didn’t need to talk, but there were glances and nods and other silent communication between them.

What were they planning? Escape?

Judging by the way the Oathbound handled these three—cautious, even a little fearful—maybe they did have a chance.

The old man scabbled up on Kofe’s back. The Greencloak took the extra weight without effort.

Conor glanced down at his mark. Briggan lay across the back of his forearm. Conor was tempted to summon the big wolf here and now. After weeks in the hull he wanted to run and run, Briggan at his heels.

He grinned to himself. Run and maybe cause a bit of trouble ...

Rollan caught his look, but shook his head.

The grin dropped to a frown. Rollan was right. How far would they get in these chains? Yet Conor was tired of biding his time. His patience had been used up. Every muscle burned, desperate to break into action. To run. To fight. To show the Oathbound what he and his companions were truly capable of.

Kana stepped up to him. “Don’t get any bright ideas, Conor.”

Conor smiled and took a deep breath. “What ideas? I’m just enjoying the fresh air.”

“I want you to keep that beast safe and sleeping right where he is. Got it?”

“Or what?”

She tilted her head to a group of sailors lining the decks. Each held a loaded crossbow.

“They’ve got a good range,” said Kana, “and would make a mess of your spirit animal.”

Conor scowled. “You sure they’d shoot *Briggan*? Maybe one might decide to send a quarrel at Cordelia? She hasn’t exactly made many friends, has she?”

Kana scowled and moved on down the line, personally checking the manacles on each and every one of them.

Meilin leaned over. “You aren’t exactly making friends, either.”

“Tried that already, and look how it turned out.” Conor grimaced. “It’s just a bit of backchat, Meilin. She deserves it.”

“She does, but we need her to relax her guard. You prodding her only keeps her attentive, wary. If we act more ... docile, then maybe they’ll make a mistake. One we can exploit.”

“Docile?” He laughed. “That’s almost funny coming from you.”

Meilin nodded. “It’s something I’ve learned from Jhi. To cultivate a *quiet* strength.”

“Might be a bit late for that. You’ve got a bit of a reputation, remember?”

“What’s that mean?” If Meilin’s arms had been free, Conor suspected she’d be crossing them right about now.

“Hey, I’m not the one who can break rocks with spinning high kicks,” he said. “Which you are going to have to teach me one day.”

“You know how to handle yourself, Conor. It’s not graceful, the way you fight, but it is effective.”

“And I fight even better with Briggan at my side.” He looked around. “If Abeke released Uraza then maybe—”

“And that’s exactly what Kana would expect. She’s waiting for us to do something stupid.”

“Then what options do we have?” he asked, kicking at pebbles as they moved.

“We wait until *they* do something stupid.”

He wished he had Meilin’s confidence, but the Oathbound had been one step ahead all the way. They weren’t going to leave anything to chance now, not when they had three of the ancient relics.

Others had freed their spirit animals. A big wolverine with dark brown fur and a jet-black muzzle sniffed around them. Sid the Generous—another Oathbound lieutenant—scratched the beast between the ears and the wolverine responded with a friendly growl. Then it cast its gaze at Conor and the growl became a threatening snarl. There was dense muscle under the fur. Conor knew these creatures would take on, and defeat, opponents much bigger.

How had such an animal bonded with Sid?

He shook his head. Some things didn’t make much sense.

“So this is where the emperor spends his summers? Very nice,” said Conor. Who would have thought there was so much marble in all Erdas? “Still, it’s no rickety shepherd’s hut up in the mountains.”

“Drafty and stinking of damp sheep?”

Conor took a deep breath, as though those sheep were around him now. “There’s no sweeter smell.”

Meilin smiled, despite it all. “You miss the old life?”

Conor shook his chains. “At moments like these, yeah, I do.”

“Tell me about it.” Meilin gazed across the docks and the pebble beach beyond. “Looks like we’ve got another visitor.”

Something was swimming through the gentle waves toward the beach. Sunlight shone upon slick greenish-blue scales and a strong, thick tail that propelled the creature swiftly through the water. Then, among the froth breaking upon the shingle, out crawled a large lizard.

Meilin’s eyes narrowed. “A Zhongese water dragon. I didn’t know they swam so close to the city.”

The lizard flicked droplets of seawater off its tail, then plodded up to an exposed slab of rock, a piece of granite cliff that must have cracked free. The water dragon turned around in a circle, then settled itself down

on a sunny spot to bask. It didn't close its eyes to sleep. Instead it kept them slitted and wary.

It was about four feet long and well fed. Curiously, the animal wore a collar. The leather strap was unfussy, but subtly decorated with branded patterns.

Conor's foot was kicked from under him. Hands manacled, he fell flat onto the pebbles.

"Oops," said Cordelia.

Blind fury filled Conor's heart. He rolled to his feet in one swift movement and charged in, taking Cordelia unawares. He rammed his head into her stomach and swung both hands up as she stumbled back. The heavy chains hanging from his wrist caught her across the jaw and she cried out, collapsing.

"Enough!" Kana gripped the chains and pulled him off.

Cordelia crawled to her feet. Her mouth was bloody and her gaze filled with dark rage. "You've made a stupid mistake, boy ..."

She drew the Wildcat's Claw.

The steel shimmered with amber and golden light as flames caressed the blade. Cordelia gripped it with both hands and pointed it at Conor.

She's insane.

He could see madness in Cordelia's eyes, and maybe the Wildcat's Claw was feeding that madness. Cordelia gritted her teeth. "Come on."

Even Kana looked wary. She didn't put herself between them. Perhaps she was afraid Cordelia would cut her down, too.

Conor backed away. "Unlock these chains and I'll fight you."

Cordelia laughed. "You'll fight me one way or another."

"Conor, move!" Meilin screamed as Cordelia charged him. Conor leaped aside, rolling over the stones as he felt the heat of the blade pass inches from his back. He sprang up and threw a stone at Cordelia.

Conor had spent more than enough summers protecting sheep from hungry predators. Every young shepherd had to learn to throw hard and straight.

The rock smacked Cordelia hard in the forehead, and she screamed with fury and pain. She braced herself, thrusting the sword ahead of her blindly as she stumbled under the impact.

The flames grew fiercer, fueled by her rage.

Conor couldn't win this fight by throwing stones. Chained, unarmed, and facing a fiery sword, he needed to use his wits.

He backed farther down the beach. The sailors and guards watched, but didn't intervene.

Water lapped around his ankles.

Cordelia spat. She turned the Wildcat's Claw in long, slow circles, drawing fiery hoops through the air. She grinned. "Where are you going to run to, boy?"

Conor waded farther in. The water was around his thighs. "Come and get me, Cordelia."

"Cordelia, don't do it," said Sid. "Let him come to you."

"Shut your mouth, Sid. The boy's going to be taught a lesson, and that can't wait."

Both hands tight around the hilt, Cordelia waded in after Conor.

Cordelia ... and all her heavy armor.

The pebbles underfoot were slippery with seaweed. The sword hissed as droplets steamed upon the fiery metal.

But if Cordelia noticed these things, she didn't care. All she wanted was to inflict pain.

Conor concentrated on keeping his balance.

The stones beneath the water had been worn smooth and flat. They balanced unevenly on each other. The lapping waves, while not high, carried with them an irresistible force. Each one was moved by countless tons of water.

Conor felt with his boots as he entered waist-deep into the brine. The flat rock, already slick, was wobbly.

He stepped off it and receded another foot.

Cordelia laughed. "You want to drown? Is that your plan?"

Conor stepped back. He yelled as he stumbled, throwing up his arms to try and keep his balance.

Seeing her chance, Cordelia yelled and surged forward.

Conor suddenly straightened up. The stumble had been fake. He swung his chain through the air.

Cordelia dodged, right onto the wobbly rock. Her right foot slipped away from her and down she went. The Wildcat's Claw steamed and went out.

Conor rushed forward.

Cordelia floundered under the water. The mail shirt itself weighed almost twenty pounds and her arms, too, were encased in shiny brass. Each time she tried to rise, Conor knocked her back down.

The fury in her eyes transformed to fear. It was only a few feet of water, but there were plenty of folk stories of knights drowning in puddles because of the weight of their armor.

“Get her up!” yelled Kana. She and a group of sailors were wading forward.

One of them grabbed Conor and hauled him back to the beach as the others raised up Cordelia. She screamed incoherently, fighting them even as they tried to save her. One let go and down she splashed again.

Rollan laughed, then embraced Conor. “Didn’t know you had it in you, Conor.”

Abeke and Meilin looked on proudly.

In the end, it took four sailors to drag Cordelia out of the sea. They dropped her onto the beach, and not gently, either. Kana waded out last of all, the Wildcat’s Claw now in her hands. She looked down as Cordelia coughed up seawater. Kana dropped the sword beside the half-drowned woman. “We’ve wasted enough time already.”

Cordelia snatched the sword and glared at Conor. Then, teeth gritted, she shoved it back into its scabbard.

Kana led the way up the path to the Summer Palace. The climb was steep and narrow. The cliffs that surrounded them were formed from black granite and patched with green tufts of moss. Water seeped out through cracks, and rivulets streamed over the jagged surface.

At the cliff top, the path transformed into a wide flagstone road leading straight to the palace gates. The entrance was guarded by Zhongese soldiers in bright armor and plumed helmets. Each man was a giant, and the halberds they carried looked as if they could slice an ox in half.

They glanced at the arriving party. Conor saw the captain of the Zhongese guards sneer as his gaze fell upon the Oathbound. Then he barked an order and the gates creaked slowly open.

The guards and sailors remained outside. Before passing through the gate, Kana turned and handed the wiry first mate a jangling bag of coins. “Our business is concluded.” She glanced at Conor as the sailors trekked back to their ship. “It would be in your best interests to behave.”

“Where are you taking us?” asked Abeke.

A brief smile flickered across Kana’s lips. “To see an old friend of mine, and my employer.”

Marble statues lined the courtyard path: magnificent beasts sculpted by masters. Proud lions, elegant herons. There were snakes and antelopes and eagles, all manner of beasts. But Conor's attention fell on a water dragon.

Meilin must have caught his look. "That belonged to an ancient hero of Zhong. His animal bond was so powerful that he could supposedly control the sea."

"No talking," commanded Kana.

The group passed through great halls with mosaics covering the floors, and along corridors lined with portraits of past emperors. Conor was surprised to find that there weren't any members of the official Zhongese guard inside the palace grounds. Just a few timid servants and *many* black-cloaked Oathbound.

The party stopped outside a pair of huge bronze doors. A servant struck the panel with a hammer, and the doors slowly parted.

The audience chamber was surrounded by windows so it could look out over the sea. In the center was a throne carved from gold and silver, studded with a medley of colorful gems. Intricately dressed servants waited on either side of the throne, and sitting upon it was ...

"Princess Song?" said Meilin, stupefied.

The girl laughed and raced across the hall. She hugged Meilin. "My friend! You're here!"

Conor frowned. "What's going on?"

Song gestured to Kana. "Chains? Really, Kana? Please free Meilin and her friends."

Kana bowed and drew out a key. A minute later Conor was rubbing his wrists as the manacles were unlocked.

Song snapped her fingers. Servants appeared from the edges of the room, carrying plates piled with food. "You all look starved," she said. Song picked a spiced bun from one of the trays and handed it delicately to Meilin. "As I remember, you seemed to like these quite a bit! I had them specially prepared."

Beside Conor, Rollan grabbed up a chicken leg. "Ship food does leave a lot to be desired."

Meilin didn't seem to have an appetite. She placed the bun back on a nearby tray. "Princess Song ... what's going on?"

The girl turned suddenly. "*Empress* Song, don't you mean?"

Meilin nodded, taken by surprise. Slowly, she bowed to the girl. “My apologies, Your Majesty.”

Song picked up a grape. “Anyway, I’d think it was obvious what’s happening. The Oathbound are retrieving the four Greencloak relics. And funny enough, it seems that the last one has been right under my nose.” She bit delicately into the grape, smiling at its sweetness.

Meilin grimaced. Her eyes flicked to Kana. “I don’t understand. The relics are symbols of the Greencloaks. Now that you have us, why aren’t we on trial? Why chase the gifts?”

Song laughed indulgently. “Because I want them.”

Conor stepped forward. “Your Majesty, the Greencloaks didn’t murder the emperor. We’re innocent. Those people who rushed the Citadel were impostors!”

“Fakecloaks killed your father!” Rollan chimed in.

Empress Song nodded, her eyes bright with understanding. “Of course they did.” She popped another grape into her mouth, then smiled. “I *hired* them to kill him.”



EMPRESS SONG

MEILIN STARED AT SONG. HAD SHE HEARD HER correctly?
Song had ordered her own father's death?

"That ... that can't be," she said. Song was a sweet-natured, quiet girl. She'd been devastated by the emperor's death. No, Song couldn't do anything like that. She was a sensible, obedient daughter, even in the face of the emperor's sternness.

Wasn't she?

Yet as Meilin watched Song, there was a hardness to her expression, a ruthlessness even. Meilin recognized it easily; she saw the same rebellious light in her own eyes whenever she gazed into a mirror.

Meilin had also been brought up to be a sensible, obedient daughter, and look where she was now. Look at the friends she had. The shepherd, the huntress, and the scoundrel. Hardly the right sort of company for a noble lady of Zhong.

The Oathbound gathered around Song. Kana whispered while Song looked curiously toward Cordelia, who still dripped with seaweed.

So these were the people Song had put *her* trust in.

Meilin stepped forward. "You planned this from the very beginning?"

Song patted Kana's shoulder. "Longer than you imagine. Kana and I have been friends since childhood. She understands me." The empress paused as she looked back at Meilin. "Just as you and I understand each other."

"What do you mean?"

“We’re the same, Meilin. My father was cruel and uncompromising. He held me back, just because I was a girl. Can you honestly say it was different for you?”

“I ... I don’t know what you mean.”

Song glowered. “Don’t lie, Meilin. Not to me. We’re so alike. We’ve both had to tread strange, sometimes painful paths to reach our goals. I didn’t have the Greencloaks to carry me away from all this, to train and encourage me. I had only Kana ... and my father.”

Meilin blushed with shame. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Song nodded. “I was good at hiding my true self. We both were. Remember the day your father brought you to the palace when we were younger? We were both so stiff and demure, weren’t we? Who could have guessed at the ferocity concealed by our makeup and silks? We hid even from each other.”

There was a scuffle behind them. For a moment Meilin worried Conor had gotten into another fight with Cordelia, but he was beside her, looking just as stunned.

Instead, Oathbound soldiers dragged in three more prisoners.

The three elder Greencloaks.

Kofe shook off one of the guards as Lady Cranston and Salaman were pushed forward. Even in chains, even after the days of rough travel and rougher treatment, they stood tall and unafraid, dominating the room.

But where was the crazy old man? Last time she’d looked he’d been on Kofe’s back.

Pride swelled in Meilin’s chest, and she raised her head. She hardly knew the three, but their defiance filled her with hope.

“I *am* sorry that the Greencloaks are casualties in all this,” Song said. “Your order has done much good. But perhaps for Zhong to move forward, it’s best that we escape your shadow.”

“Is *that* why you framed us?” Abeke asked. “You could have just spoken against us at the Citadel.”

The empress shook her head sadly. She turned, drifting back to the end of the hall. “It’s nothing so grand or complicated. You just had something I wanted. Something your order would never part with peacefully. Thanks to you, Meilin, and your friends, I now have three of the Greencloaks’ relics.” Song settled back onto her throne. “But what I’ve always sought is the Dragon’s Eye.”

“To do what?” Meilin asked.

Song glanced to the open window overlooking the beach. Then she turned back toward the others. Slowly, she pulled back on the collar of her dress. A pale tattoo was curled at the base of her shoulder. There was a flash of brilliance, and then a long, green shape stretched out before the throne, wearing a simple leather collar. “I believe you’ve met my water dragon, Seaspray.”

Meilin and the others gaped.

“You—you have a spirit animal!” Meilin stammered. “How was this kept secret? And *why*?”

Song frowned down at the creature. “Father insisted. Ambassador Ying, the Greencloak who administered my Nectar, was sworn to secrecy on pain of death. Perhaps Father worried I’d be tempted to join the order. You must know the stories of the ancient water dragon. It’s second only to Jhi in our legends. I think Father wanted to announce such an auspicious pairing on his own terms: to claim I was the nameless hero reborn. Until, that is, he discovered the truth about my animal *partner*.”

Song scowled. The water dragon at her feet slowly lifted his head, blinked, and then drooped again, curling lazily into a ball. “Pathetic, isn’t he?”

“No spirit animal is pathetic,” Meilin replied hotly. “You’re lucky to have one and should remember that.”

Song wasn’t listening. “No matter what I did, our bond never produced the power or majesty of the ancient hero’s. Father always told me the daughter of an emperor should have a greater creature. Something worthy of her status. Not an overgrown lizard who cares about nothing but basking in the sun.”

Song took a deep breath, only just maintaining her composure. “But with the Dragon’s Eye, I can make Seaspray better. The ancient water dragon could command the sea. Now *that* would be power worthy of an empress, don’t you think?”

Rollan spoke. “Control the sea? Why? To catch bigger fish?”

Song’s eyes sparkled. “Of a sort.”

Meilin racked her memory for legends of the mythic warrior and his water dragon. They were little more than fairy tales, but she’d been told them all when she was little. There were great adventures, the warrior riding on the back of his beast. They dined under the sea and towed ships through storms and ...

... raised tsunamis to destroy their enemies.

One had wiped out an army of evil giants, covering the battlefield with waves over a hundred feet tall. Meilin's nanny had laughed at such a ridiculous tale—there were no such things as giants. Yet all legends grew from a kernel of truth.

But creating a tsunami? Was that even possible?

Was the Dragon's Eye that powerful?

"I must thank you for getting me three of the relics," said Song, bringing her attention back to them. "The crown, the jewel, and the sword will all help consolidate my rule. And once I have the Dragon's Eye, my position as empress will be unassailable."

Rollan folded his arms. "If you think we're going to help you get it, then you're insane."

"Not you." Song pointed at the three other prisoners. "They'll get it for me. Won't you?"

Kofe grunted. "We don't make deals with usurpers."

Song flinched. Then she forced a crooked smile onto her lips. She gestured to one of her Oathbound soldiers. "Throw the scrawny one out the window."

"Hey!" yelled Rollan as the soldier grabbed him around the waist.

Meilin tried to jump forward, but her legs were knocked from under her by another Oathbound. He stood over her, a spear pointed over her heart.

Rollan fought hard. He kicked and bit and pulled at his captor, but the soldier shrugged off his attacks with little effort. The window was full height, and wide open. They were a hundred feet above the sea and the jagged rocks that lay at the foot of the cliffs.

The soldier lifted Rollan high over his head.

"Your spirit animal is Essix, isn't she?" Song said. "It's a shame she never taught you to fly."

She nodded at the Oathbound.

"We'll do it!" shouted Kofe. "Put the boy down."

Meilin held her breath. She'd never imagine Song could be so evil. This girl before her was a stranger, nothing like the princess Meilin thought she'd know.

The soldier still had Rollan overhead. A draft pulled hungrily from the window, as if trying to tempt the guard.

Song gestured to the floor. "Put the boy down."

The Oathbound dropped Rollan heavily to the marble floor.

Meilin was beside him in an instant. She took hold of him and brought him to his feet.

He gave her that smirk that she knew too well. His dark brown hair had grown long the last few weeks and hung over the side of one eye. She brushed it aside. “Are you all right?”

His eyes glistened as they met hers. “I am now.”

Song gave a mocking snort. “How very touching. The noble and the peasant. Honestly, Meilin, I thought you had taste.”

Face pale, Rollan gazed at Song with pure hatred. Meilin feared he would attack her, despite the plentiful guards. But then he looked over at Kofe. “I’m sorry.”

The big man merely shrugged. “Greencloaks look after one another. No need to be sorry about that.”

Meilin frowned at Song. “If the Dragon’s Eye is here, why don’t you send the Oathbound to get it? *They’re* your allies, after all.”

Meilin saw Sid go pale. Even Cordelia looked hesitant. Kana and Song exchanged a look that seemed to communicate something, though Meilin couldn’t interpret what it was. Kana gave a small shake of her head.

It dawned on Meilin then. The princess knew the whereabouts of the Eye, so why *didn’t* she already have it?

Meilin snorted with contempt. “I see. Your allies are afraid. That’s what happens when you have to buy loyalty, Song, rather than earn it.”

Song rolled her eyes. “Let me stop you there, before you embarrass yourself by prattling on about things you don’t understand. The Oathbound may be mercenaries, but Kana and I have been friends since we were young children. We dreamed and planned for this day *together*. Why waste any more of my own forces on this? Especially when victory is so close.”

Song’s expression was smug, but by the way she’d said “any more,” Meilin suspected the empress wasn’t being truthful.

Then it struck her. Song *had* tried the Oathbound, but they’d failed.

That was why she was using the Greencloaks. Kofe, Lady Cranston, and Salaman were exceptional. After all, they were senior Greencloaks. If anyone could retrieve the Dragon’s Eye—hidden by the very first Greencloak himself—it would be them.

Meilin just hoped the three could buy enough time doing it. Every moment the Eye remained out of Song’s hands was another moment for

Essix to summon aid. It seemed to be the only hope they had.

Fly fast, Essix.

“It seems you’ve planned everything,” said Abeke. “Yet you won’t succeed.”

Song laughed. “Oh, and tell me why. Please, I’m fascinated.”

Abeke looked to the three Oathbound. “One is measured by the company she keeps. And you, Song, keep very poor company.”

Song’s jaw tensed. Meilin wondered if Abeke’s words had pushed the usurper too far.

But the empress forced herself to relax. “Yet here I sit upon the throne. And there *you* are.”

The Oathbound gathered around Meilin and her friends. She took hold of Rollan’s hand.

Song nodded to Kana. “Lock them up somewhere deep and dark.”



CHIEF UGO

“**B**RING ME MY ROBE,” SONG ORDERED. “THEN TELL THE Niloan delegation to enter.”

Two servants helped her put on the yellow imperial cloak. They draped the long sleeves to hang down to the floor and carefully fastened its golden clasps up to her neck.

The collar choked her, but Song couldn't, *wouldn't* alter it. This was what the ruler of Zhong wore.

The robe was heavy, cumbersome, and hot. How had her father been able to wear it all day long? She felt as if it would crush her.

“The crown. Quickly.”

The servants lowered it very carefully onto her brow. Song made sure she kept her head still and her neck straight. The first time she'd put the crown on, it had fallen off with a spectacular clamor. The looks of horror on the nobles who'd been present had been crushing.

An ill-omened start to her rule.

Song settled herself onto the throne.

Her father's throne.

She shifted, trying to get comfortable. This didn't suit her, either.

He'd made it look so easy.

Her heart fluttered. It wasn't pain, not quite, but it hurt. Her father had been so accomplished at everything, it seemed to her. But she'd struggled at it all. At all the courtly arts. She'd seen the looks of disappointment, brief at first, but longer as she grew older, the shakes of his head when she'd not measured up to his impossible ideal. She'd hid

her tears from him, knowing they'd only confirm his belief that she was a failure. Only Kana had witnessed those.

She'd wanted him to be proud of her, just *once*.

Song pressed her hand upon the carved armrest of the throne. *Her* throne.

"Are you proud now, Father?"

Kana turned to her. "Did you say something?"

Song didn't dare shake her head; the crown would fall off. Instead she smiled at her friend. Her *only* friend. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Kana."

Kana touched her hand. "We're in this together, Song. As always."

The Niloan delegation was unexpected. Their ship had arrived last night. Song had tried to delay seeing them until she could get her hands on the Dragon's Eye, but the delegation was growing impatient.

Once she had the Eye, Song would have it added to the front of the crown. Then everyone would immediately see how powerful a ruler she was.

Greater than her father.

Brunhild the Merry, Song's Oathbound attendant, leaned close to her side. The woman was as dour as her ironically chipper title might suggest, but Kana had assigned her especially before enacting their plan to frame the Greencloaks. Whatever Brunhild lacked in personality, she was watchful and competent. "Chief Ugo is a cousin to the High Chieftain," Brunhild whispered. "He is here to demand—"

"Demand? No one demands anything of me," snapped Song. "I am the Empress of Zhong."

"Of course you are." Brunhild cleared her throat. "He's here to *request* leniency for the Greencloaks. It appears he and Olvan were friends in their youth. Old loyalties are hardest to break."

"Impossible. The Greencloaks are criminals. Olvan the worst of all."

Song met the Oathbound woman's gaze unflinchingly. Brunhild had played her part in the lie regarding the emperor's death, and had even worked behind the scenes to create Kana's false history, transforming her into "Anka" and allowing her to infiltrate the Greencloaks.

If the true story of their plotting ever emerged, it wouldn't just be Song whose life was destroyed. The Oathbound would go down with her.

The doors opened and the Niloan diplomats entered.

Chief Ugo was a giant. He stood a head taller than even Brunhild. He wore flowing robes of blue and yellow, and his massive arms were encircled with gold bands. A necklace of lapis lazuli wrapped his immensely thick neck.

Song could see how he'd been friends with Olvan. They had the same presence, a mixture of physical power and charisma.

She sat a little straighter.

Behind the chief were three others, his advisers. One she recognized: a trade minister who'd regularly visited her father. The other two—a tall man and an elegantly dressed woman—she knew nothing about.

None looked happy.

Chief Ugo stopped a few feet in front of the throne and gave a curt, shallow nod. Hardly the bow that was customary when greeting the empress of a major nation.

Song bit her tongue, even as she glanced at Brunhild. She could order Ugo to his knees, if she wanted.

"We are not used to being kept waiting," snapped Ugo.

"Kingdoms do not run themselves," replied Song. "I was busy. What do you want, Chief Ugo?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead he cast his gaze across the assembled throng of Oathbound guards, a mild sneer of contempt on his lips. "I see you keep a very different court than your father's."

"My father's court was old and useless. Zhong needs new ideas."

"Perhaps ..." His eyes locked on Kana, watching blankly from the far corner of the space. "But the Oathbound were never meant to serve as a government. Nilo is grateful for their help in protecting the High Chieftain, but they're soldiers. We are now in peacetime."

"These are my most loyal allies," said Song.

"These mercenaries?" said Ugo. "I see you have Cordelia the *Kind* among your court."

Cordelia bowed with a mocking smile. "I'm honored you know of me."

"Don't be. I've heard much of your *kindness* as you tracked the Heroes of Erdas across Eura. Villages burned. Lives ruined."

Song gritted her teeth. "You traveled a long way just to deliver insults, Chief Ugo."

"I did not expect to have to address murderers when I arrived at the palace."

Cordelia unsheathed Wildcat's Claw in a flash. "What did you say?"

Ugo's gaze went cold. "You heard me."

He pulled back his sleeve, and a beast thundered into existence with a crack of light. A rhinoceros snorted, standing between him and the deadly Oathbound warrior.

Song's heart hammered as she clutched the throne's armrest.

The beast beat its hoof on the marble floor and the room shook. Its horn was over two feet in length, and the tip appeared as sharp as any dagger. Song imagined the horrific injuries it could inflict.

Sid shuffled away from Cordelia, as did Wikam the Just, giving a little whimper. Beside Song, Brunhild placed her hand on the hilt of her sword.

Song took a deep breath and stood. "Please, my friends. We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot. Ugo is right. We are *finally* a world at peace. We're all allies here. Cordelia, put the sword away."

Cordelia's eyes blazed as fiercely as the flames on her blade, but she sheathed it.

Chief Ugo walked to the rhino. The animal's tiny ears twitched as he patted its forehead. He whispered something and the rhino struck the floor hard, cracking it. Then it disappeared with a second flash. Ugo brushed his hand over the image of the beast, now transplanted onto his forearm. He swept around to face Song. "I came to speak on behalf of the Greencloaks—to argue for clemency. I know Olvan to be a good man, and I don't believe he was involved in the assassination of your father. The High Chieftain allowed me to come to you and plead my case." The man narrowed his eyes. "That *was* what I came to do, until I discovered you were holding Greencloaks here—including the young Heroes of Erdas! Why haven't you mentioned this to the other nations? The Heroes should be with their own in Greenhaven."

"The Greencloaks *murdered* my father." Song's face turned red with anger. "How dare you—"

"They are entitled to a *fair and open* trial before all the nations. I'll be returning to my home tomorrow to tell the High Chieftain of what I've learned here. I will expect word that the Greencloaks have been released to Greenhaven by the time I arrive."

"Or what?" snapped Song.

Chief Ugo didn't answer. With one last, contemptuous glance at the Oathbound he swept around and left, his companions following. Two

Oathbound guards closed the doors behind them.

Song hurled her crown at the door, where it shattered into several shimmering, delicate pieces. “How dare he? Doesn’t he know who I am?”

All around the room, the Oathbound looked nervous. They refused to meet her gaze. This only made Song angrier. They all owed her everything!

She turned her attention to Kana, motioning her toward the throne. Song could count on Kana, at least. The young woman strode forward. Her chameleon must have been in its passive form, because the leader of the Oathbound was fully visible.

“Please, my friend,” Song whispered as she arrived. “Deal with this troublesome chieftain.”

“How, Empress?”

Song paused. “You know how,” she said finally. “Make my problem disappear. Make it look like Greencloaks if you have to.”

Kana glanced around the court, then leaned forward, right up to Song. “That would be unwise, Song. Few Greencloaks remain at large. People may grow suspicious ... and they might turn their gaze to *us*.”

Song’s own gaze darkened. “I see. Perhaps you are right.”

So even Kana defies me.

“Then I will deal with Chief Ugo myself,” said Song. “Once I have the Dragon’s Eye.”

“What do you mean?”

Song didn’t answer her. Instead she strode across the long chamber to pick up the pieces of her crown. The thing was well beyond repair. “The Dragon’s Eye gives command over the sea,” she called back across the room. “It would be a shame if the chief’s ship sank on its journey home, wouldn’t it?”

Cordelia laughed. “I don’t think rhinos swim very well.”

Standing at the throne, Kana didn’t look so happy. “Be careful, Song. Nilo is powerful. You need to be more cautious about which enemies you make.”

“Cautious? If I’d been cautious we wouldn’t be here. I’d be in my chambers, playing with dolls, and you’d be on the beach, guarding it from seagulls.” Song took a deep breath, then bounced across the room, back to her throne. She took Kana’s hand. “I’m sorry, my friend. I spoke in haste. Your prudence is right, of course. Just as it’s always been.

Arrange for more food and drink for our Niloan guests. Make them comfortable.”

“And what about Chief Ugo’s request?”

Song tossed the pieces of crown aside. “It’s a long journey back to Nilo,” she said. “Much can happen in that time.”



ONE HOUR

“THIS IS EVEN WORSE THAN THE SHIP,” SAID ABEKE. “I didn’t think that was possible.” She squatted by the small grille at the back of the cell, watching the sun set over the sea.

They’d been down here all day.

Conor sighed. “Some heroes we turned out to be.”

Abeke continued to gaze out west. Seagulls circled over the surf, but she was searching for a falcon. When would Essix return? And what aid would she bring?

Far across that expanse was Greenhaven. Abeke feared what Song was planning for it, if she got her hands on the Dragon’s Eye. Meilin had told them about the ancient hero and his bonded water dragon—the stories of what they’d been capable of. If Song achieved only half the feats mentioned in the legends, then they were in deep trouble.

A small boat drifted along the bottom of the cliffs. Abeke could just make out a single rower—a fisherman, she supposed—struggling to keep his boat off the rocks. He was fighting hard and was clearly no sailor. She winced as one wave almost tilted the vessel over. Seagulls swooped over him, hoping to steal some of his catch.

What was he doing this late in the evening? He didn’t have a lantern. He was too clumsy to be a smuggler. Abeke shook her head as he disappeared into the dark shadows of the cliffs.

She hoped he was a good swimmer.

“Someone’s coming,” warned Rollan.

Armored footsteps stopped at the iron-bound cell door. Keys rattled and the hinges groaned.

Brunhild glowered at them. She gestured with her sword. “Out. All of you.”

Abeke narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

The woman pressed her lips together.

Conor shrugged and went to the door. “She did ask nicely, Abeke.”

More Oathbound soldiers waited outside the cell. Abeke and the others were pushed along, and down. And down ... and down. The narrow, spiraling stairs seemed to go on forever. The deeper they got, the more Abeke was overwhelmed by the smell of fetid, damp air. Sickly green moss matted the dripping walls.

Eventually the stairs ended, and they passed through a roughly hewn tunnel and entered a large, irregular cave.

Song stood nearby, with more Oathbound beside her. To her right, Wikam the Just sneered as the Greencloaks entered. He was holding some kind of small box, covered in thick burlap. His vulture spirit animal was perched heavily on his shoulder, though the Oathbound didn't seem to even notice the weight.

“You took your time,” Song said.

“We were busy,” answered Rollan. “These games of ‘I Spy’ can get pretty intense.”

How deep were they? Abeke wondered. Water dripped from above and pooled on the uneven floor.

The cavern appeared to be naturally formed. Abeke could just about hear the sound of the surf somewhere on the other side of the rock. Seawater seeped through the cracks, and large puddles lay over the uneven stone. Apart from the stairs there was one other exit, a large, circular door almost twenty feet in diameter.

She'd never seen a door like it. Hundreds of animals covered it, all inlaid in precious metals and mother-of-pearl. Their eyes were gemstones, and their teeth and claws ivory.

It looked as if the entire wildlife of Erdas had been trapped upon the door. Tigers, elephants, swallows, and sharks—and every creature that flew, swam, crawled, or walked. They overlapped, merging together and then breaking apart. The wavering lantern light added to the sense of movement, as if the menagerie would burst to life any moment.

“What do you want?” asked Abeke suspiciously.

Song walked up to the door. “What do you think? The Dragon’s Eye.”
“You sent Kofe and the others to get it.”

Song hesitated. A worried look flashed across her face. “They’re not back.”

Rollan laughed. “Maybe they found it and escaped. They could be a hundred miles from here by now.”

Abeke doubted that was true, despite her fervent hopes. She looked back at the ornate door. It radiated danger.

A few of the soldiers carried in extra weapons and deposited them in a pile. Abeke glanced at Meilin, who seemed to understand where this was going.

Abeke folded her arms. “We’re not going to get it for you.”

Song met her gaze. “Shouldn’t you discuss it with your friends first?”

“I don’t need to.”

“I could offer you anything you want.”

“What we want is for you to go to prison for your crimes. For a long, long time.”

“Or forever,” added Conor. “Forever also works.”

Song scowled. “What about your freedom? You get me the Eye, and I’ll put you on a ship home. I promise.”

“How can we trust the word of someone who kills her own family?” asked Abeke. “And where would we be safe, knowing what we know?”

“You’re making things difficult, Abeke.”

“Good.”

Song shook her head. “I suspected as much. But this might motivate you. A little present from Wikam’s vulture.”

“No!” Rollan gasped from behind Abeke as Wikam pulled back on the burlap covering to reveal an iron cage.

Essix shrieked from within. The cage was so small that she couldn’t open her wings. The gyrfalcon knocked at the bars in fury.

Rollan jumped forward, pulling down on his collar. “Essix, go into passive sta—!” Before he could finish, Brunhild knocked him to the ground with a hard slap.

Song nodded to Wikam, who scurried quickly out of the cavern.

Rollan pushed himself back up, his eyes burning with hatred. “Let Essix go!” he yelled.

A cruel smile twitched on Song’s lips. “Oh, I will. *If* you do as I say.”

Abeke glared at her. “How do we know you’ll keep your word?”

“You don’t. But if you refuse me, I’ll have Essix’s cage weighted down and thrown from the cliff top into the sea. I’ll even let you watch. If she isn’t smashed into a pile of bloody feathers upon the rocks, then ... well, let’s hope she can hold her breath for a long, long time.” The empress’s pretty gaze flashed to Conor. “Or forever.”

Rollan groaned in despair.

What could they do? Abeke looked at Rollan, at his pure misery. Her heart broke to see his pain. She would feel the same if they had Uraza in a cage.

Abeke turned to her friends.

They knew each other so well by now; there was no need to speak. Each would sacrifice their life for the other.

If Essix died, they might as well rip out Rollan’s heart. Abeke couldn’t let that happen.

She glanced back to the cavern door, where she saw the air begin to shimmer. *Kana*, Abeke realized, just as the Oathbound leader bled into view. Kana watched the team impassively, leaning beside the enormous door. Toey, her chameleon, crawled slowly across her shoulder.

“You won’t get away with this,” said Abeke.

Abeke had been looking at Kana when she spoke, but it was Song who answered. The empress looked surprised. “Oh? I think I just have. Gather your weapons.”

Rollan stared at the empress. “If anything happens to Essix, I’ll make you—”

“*Please*, no more melodrama,” interrupted Song. “Just get *on* with it.”

It took four soldiers to pull open the door. Immediately Abeke was struck by a hot, scorching wind.

Kana held up a tall candle, carved with even lines to mark the time. “You have an hour. I wouldn’t try to escape. If you’re not back with the Dragon’s Eye, Essix goes for a swim.” She winked. “Good luck.”

Rollan gritted his teeth, trapping his rage.

Abeke gathered a bow and a quiver of arrows. She walked through the door. Her three friends, now also armed, followed just behind.

The tunnel ahead was dark.

“Remember—*one* hour,” warned Song.

Then the door was pushed closed behind them.



FIRE

CONOR TOOK A FEW MOMENTS TO GET USED TO THE darkness. The tunnel glowed faintly, with a greenish hue. He inspected the walls and picked off a handful of moss. It radiated a weak light, much like the glow of the sea at night.

“It’s like being in Sadre again,” Conor murmured. “How fun,” he added with a sigh.

The others were all crowded around him. Abeke carried a bow, Meilin a sword, and Rollan had a spear. Conor had taken a staff. It wasn’t a warrior’s weapon like his usual ax, but the weight reminded him of a shepherd’s crook. Conor felt reassured just gripping the smooth wood.

“Only one way we can go,” he said. “Forward.”

The hairs on his nape prickled.

He could see a stronger light ahead of them, and with it rose a strange, putrid smell.

“Come on, Briggan. I need some help.”

Conor ran his fingers over the mark on his forearm and his skin stung with brief heat as Briggan emerged.

The wolf shook himself vigorously, spittle flying from his black lips. He yawned, then padded up next to Conor.

Abeke joined him. “Shall I call Uraza?”

“Maybe later. I need Briggan to sniff around a bit.”

Briggan wrinkled his snout and growled.

“I know it smells bad,” Conor said, “but is it dangerous?”

“You can get poisonous gases down in mines,” suggested Meilin. “You’re worried it’s something similar?”

“That’s what I want to find out,” said Conor. “Kofe and the others came this way, and it didn’t seem like much could take *them* down.”

“Maybe Rollan was right,” Meilin said hopefully. “Maybe they found another way out and escaped.”

Conor looked over at her. “Is that what you think?”

“No,” she replied in a small voice.

They marched on for a hundred yards or so. It wasn’t easy to judge distance in the dark. The tunnel was naturally eroded, so it was crooked and fractured in places, leaving deep cracks within the walls and broken rocks underfoot. Stalactites large and small hung down from the curved roof. Small rivulets of seawater dribbled between the cracks. The putrid smell grew stronger as the tunnel opened up.

And there was something else, the smell of burning.

Was it mine gas? Back in Eura, miners took canaries down with them when they descended below the earth. The little birds would be the first to perish if poisonous gas leaked into the mines. Many deadly gases were undetectable to humans, but if the canary died, then the miners knew to evacuate to safety.

As a boy, Conor had always felt sad for the little birds. Without them, however, the humans had no way of surviving. But Briggan’s nose was more sensitive than any human’s—and so was Conor’s when he had his wolf with him.

The air stung his nostrils and made his eyes water, but otherwise it didn’t seem to hurt him.

They reached the mouth of a chamber. This space, too, had formed naturally, but craftsmen had worked it into something roughly cubic. On the far end, forty or so feet away, was an opening leading farther in.

Above the entrance to the chamber was a steel plaque, bearing a symbol of a flame.

“Strange,” said Meilin.

Conor sniffed. The putrid smell swamped the air.

Briggan barked, and then the breath left Conor’s lungs in a rush.

There was a body lying within the cavern.

Rollan gasped. “It’s Salaman.”

The Greencloak’s body was burned. His cloak, or what was left of it, was black with soot. A strong smell of smoke lingered within the

chamber.

“We’ve got to get him,” said Rollan. He took a step forward.

“Wait,” said Conor. “Did you see the marks on him? He’s been badly scorched.”

There were no fires that Conor could make out, but the walls themselves were sooty.

“There’s a trap in here,” he said. “But I can’t see it.”

What had killed the Greencloak?

Conor was sure the smell was part of the danger. The odor irritated his nostrils and the back of his throat. Its rottenness reminded him of ... what?

A swamp. It was the same earthy, decaying odor. Swamps trapped things: fallen trees, wayward sheep. There’d been that one time, way back, when he and his father had tracked down a lamb missing from the herd. They’d found it struggling in the mud, and the air had the same smell. His father had waded in to get it, then showed him a trick with the tinderbox. He’d lit a bit of char cloth with their flint and fire steel, and then ...

“The air catches fire,” said Conor, remembering the burst of gas as his father had thrown the char cloth over the patch. It had popped loudly and created a ball of fire, lasting only a second or two, but enough to singe his eyebrows.

Conor ran his fingers through Briggan’s thick fur. “I think it would be safer if you rested on my arm.”

The wolf sniffed the air one more time, then licked Conor’s palm. A second later he was gone, and the mark was back on Conor’s forearm.

“Look at the floor,” said Meilin.

Metal tiles covered the floor. Most were rusty and badly arranged, corners jammed in at awkward angles and wedged tightly against each other.

Rollan snorted. “Whoever fitted those must have been breathing too many cave fumes.”

Conor wasn’t so sure. “Get behind me.”

He took a step back, then, using his staff, pressed down on the nearest tile.

It depressed, the edges scraping together.

He drew the staff back. “The tiles are on springs. You step on them and they’ll move.”

“So?” asked Abeke.

Conor rubbed the edges of his hands together. “Steel on steel, Abeke. It makes sparks.”

Meilin gasped. “Igniting the gas.”

“We could climb around the edge,” suggested Rollan, squinting at the room’s borders.

“See those soot marks?” Conor had wondered the same thing. “That’s what previous people have tried. If you slip, you hit the tiles hard, guaranteeing a spark.”

Meilin put her hands on her hips. “Rope would be useful.”

Conor had to agree. But they didn’t have any.

The cavern was too wide to jump. The walls were too treacherous to climb. Conor reckoned there were about fifty paces across, fifty tiles. Running wouldn’t work—the impact would strike sparks—and even moving slowly was dangerous. The rusty edges of the old tiles might light up with even a small amount of weight.

“Where does the gas come from?” asked Abeke, getting down on her knees to look under the misaligned tiles. “I think I can see vents in the rock.”

Conor nodded. “It’s like a bog. Organic matter rots in some cavern below; the gas seeps upward and gets trapped here, waiting to be set off.”

Abeke looked at the walls. “The cave is covered in that moss. Salaman must have climbed around, but lost his grip.”

Meilin threw up her hands. “Then we’re stuck!”

“No, we’re not,” said Conor.

“Then how do we get across without igniting the gas?”

“We don’t.” Conor grinned. “We set off the explosion.”

“That’s insane” was Meilin’s reply.

“Maybe, but think about it. The gas isn’t endless. It’s made from rotting material. That takes time. If we set off one big explosion, then we can easily cross before the gas refills the chamber.”

Conor thought it must have worked for the previous group of Greencloaks. They’d tried climbing around, but Salaman had fallen, setting off a burst. Then, as the gas had begun to pour back into the chamber, Kofe and Lady Cranston must have sprinted the rest of the way across.

Meilin didn’t look convinced. “How long?”

Conor shook his head. “No idea. But that’s what makes it exciting?”
“That’s not the word I’d use.”

Conor searched around the entrance until he found a large rock crammed between fissures in the cave. “Give me a hand with this.”

Together, the Greencloaks were able to pry the stone free from the cave wall. With all four holding a corner, they carried it to the edge of the chamber and dropped it down.

The tunnel itself was irregular, with many nooks where the rock jutted out crookedly. Conor pointed at a particularly large stone outcrop. “Once we toss the rock, let’s take cover behind that, okay? When the first explosion has passed, we need to be quick. No hanging around—just over to the other tunnel as quickly as possible.”

Meilin still didn’t look convinced, but they were running out of time. How much of the hour candle had already diminished while they’d been chatting here?

Conor and the others lifted the rock up and shuffled to the edge of the opening. “On the count of three,” said Conor. They swung it back. “One ...”

The second swing was wider than the first. Conor felt as if his arms were being pulled out of their sockets. “Two ...”

The final swing was the widest yet. “Three!”

With four great cries, they hurled the rock as far as they could.

It crashed upon a circle of tiles and instantly the sparks flew. The explosion was quicker than Conor had expected. The area around the rock burst into flame and the chamber itself rumbled as the surrounding gas ignited.

“Take cover!” Conor yelled. The Greencloaks turned and fled back down the tunnel as the whole chamber filled with heat and flame.

Conor came last, and the final burst tore him off his feet. He tumbled over the stony floor as a sheet of flame passed over him, caressing the top of his shoulders with pain.

The air hissed and stank as the flames died down.

Before he even had a chance to get his bearings, Abeke pulled him up. “Now, Conor!”

Conor shook away the confusion and pain. He’d have time to suffer later. They needed to cross the chamber *now*.

The putrid smell was gone, proof the gas had been used up. Meilin and Rollan were already a few paces ahead, racing across the tiles. The

metal squares creaked and sparked, but did nothing more. There were a few pockets of flame in the chamber's uneven corners, however, where the gas still lingered. The air scorched and the tiles simmered with heat that Conor felt through his boots.

He reached the room's midway point. Meilin and Rollan dove through the far exit. They then turned and shouted encouragement. Abeke was ahead of him, leaping so lightly that the tiles hardly moved.

Conor stepped hard on a particularly rusty tile. The spring beneath the tile snapped, and he plummeted about six inches, tearing the skin off his shins before hitting the stone ground beneath.

The thick, stinking odor was returning. Conor tried to get up, but one step and he cried out in pain. He'd sprained his ankle badly.

"Come on, Conor!" yelled Abeke, now beside their friends at the chamber's exit.

Conor hopped forward. With his whole weight on one foot, the tile he landed on dipped and cracked out a shower of sparks. Small flames flicked between the metal sheets.

The explosive gas was refilling the chamber far quicker than he'd thought.

He hopped from tile to tile, dragging his sprained foot along. Each landing generated more sparks, and the flames grew thicker and lasted longer. His trouser cuffs caught alight.

"Run, Conor!" shouted Rollan.

Conor focused on his friends, all shouting and waving at him. He jumped along, ignoring the fires now rising all around him. The air began to hiss and pop. He was only a few yards away!

He dove, throwing himself the final distance into his friends' arms. The impact knocked all four of them backward with a thump.

Conor lay there, gasping. He felt a dull ache in his ankle and knew it would soon intensify into pure pain. But right now he was alive and that was what mattered. He sighed with great, great relief.

Conor rolled over onto his back. When he opened his eyes there was Meilin, grinning at him.

"Well, you were right!" she said. "That *was* exciting!"



SWARM

ROLLAN COULDN'T GET ESSIX OUT OF HIS MIND. THE image of his falcon trapped in that hideous cage was like a knife through his chest.

How could Song—how could *anyone* with a spirit animal themselves—do that?

Anger threatened to overwhelm him. It had taken all his willpower to stop himself from charging the guards the moment Essix had been revealed.

It would have been suicide, but at least it would have been something. Instead they'd agreed to this ordeal, which seemed just as suicidal.

Rollan's clothes stank of smoke, and he was sure half his eyebrows were gone from that first explosion. So what was next?

He didn't care. He'd get through it, get through all the dangers. He would save Essix.

Jhi was tending Conor's bleeding leg. The panda had licked it clean and the tear was now closed. Using Meilin as support, Conor tested his weight on the twisted ankle. The grimace of pain wasn't exactly encouraging.

Meilin took out her sword and sliced up her cloak. "We need to knot it up tightly. By locking it rigid, you'll at least be able to walk."

Conor frowned. "The first test and we're already handicapped."

"Hey, we're still all here," said Rollan. "I bet the rest will be easy."

"Really?" Meilin arched an eyebrow.

"No. Probably perilous to the extreme, but you have to keep being positive, don't you?"

“You are truly impossible, Rollan.”

He grinned at her. “And that’s why you like me.”

He laughed as she blushed, and Conor rolled his eyes. “I’m in quite a lot of pain, so can we save the romantic banter for later? If there is a later.”

Rollan saluted. “Yes, sir.”

A mournful wind blew down the tunnel. Air whistled through narrow cracks, and the farther they went, the stronger the gusts became.

Abeke was up ahead and she raised her hand. “Our next deadly danger is here.”

Rollan stepped beside her. “Well. That’s quite a drop.”

The cavern opened into a shaft, a wide one. Above them hung hundreds of stalactites of all shapes and sizes. Far below were their stalagmite siblings, looking unpleasantly spear-sharp.

The gap between this side and the tunnel opening on the next had to be more than a hundred feet. The wind roared up through this strange, natural chimney. There was only one way across, and it made Rollan’s heart sink.

Suspended above the spikes were a series of chains, arranged in pairs, with short wooden handles.

Five trapezes. The only way across was to swing from one to the other, five times.

The chains creaked in the wind. The nearest was a good ten feet away from them.

“Are those ... bones down there?” asked Conor.

He was right. Even from this high up, Rollan saw the rotten clothes and shattered skeletons of those who’d tried crossing before them.

He shook his head. “Even the best acrobat in the world couldn’t do it.”

“We have to try,” insisted Conor.

“We try and we’ll fail.” Rollan sat down on the ledge. “Wouldn’t it be easier if we just got down there and walked across? Then climbed up the other side?”

Conor leaned over. “Now that you mention it, it would.”

Rollan stood up. “Let’s do it.”

Meilin looked over at Jhi. The panda peered over the edge, then sat down.

Meilin smiled. “Yes, I know what you mean.”

She brushed Jhi's cheek and a moment later the panda was gone

Rollan paused at the ledge. "I hate to say it, but Kovo would be handy right now. He could carry us on his back all the way across, no problem."

"If he were in a good mood." Abeke was next to him, wiping her hands on her trousers. "And have you ever seen him in a good mood?"

"Fair point. More likely he'd tear us limb from limb."

Abeke rubbed her hands together. "Who goes first?"

"It was my idea." Rollan sighed. "So I suppose I'd better."

Slowly, Rollan dropped down to a lower ledge. Even before the Greencloaks, he'd been climbing for years—buildings mainly—but in the end it was simply a case of making sure you relaxed. People got scared and tired themselves out by gripping so hard their hands ached. Rollan was careful to use his legs to support his weight, rather than his arms, in order to conserve his strength.

He moved from ledge to ledge, constantly checking back to make sure the others were following him. Meilin and Conor moved carefully downward, following the same route as him, but Abeke took another path, using her flexibility and nimbleness to stretch and read the most minute holds. Soon she passed him, winking as she swung from one hold to another. The wind pulled at him, as if trying to tear him away from the stone. It hummed across the rough, rocky surface, tugging at his clothes. The air was cold and damp, and the rocks themselves were blemished with moss. Rollan avoided those—vegetation could come away—and kept his grip on the rock itself.

His toes reached the tip of a stalagmite. Rollan carefully pushed away from the wall, leaping toward the column of stone. He grabbed onto the slippery stone and slid to a nearby foothold.

"You took your time," said Abeke, squatting on a rock with her chin on both fists.

"I just wanted to enjoy the view," he replied.

She grimaced. "Some view."

The floor of the cavern was uneven, dense with the limestone spikes and wavy razor-edges of stone. Nasty.

"Look there," said Abeke. "On the ledge."

It was Lady Cranston.

Rollan shinnied sideways across a jutting stalagmite and dropped down lightly.

He leaned over. "Lady Cranston? Are you—"

Her face was swollen, covered in large red lumps. Her fingers, too, were thick and puffy. No breath emerged.

“It wasn’t the fall that killed her,” said Abeke, joining him with a single springing step.

As Rollan’s eyes got used to the gloom, he noticed something moving.

In fact, a lot of things were moving.

The others clambered onto the remains of a shattered rock nearby. Abeke scowled as she gazed below her. “What is that? The floor seems to be alive.”

It was. The ground seethed with ants. Among the stalagmites were huge mounds, homes to these creatures. They covered the floor of the cavern in their billions.

Rollan brushed some inquisitive insects off the end of his boot, but one latched on. He felt its bite even through the leather before flicking it off.

Suddenly he knew what had happened to Lady Cranston.

Rollan drew the cloak back over her face.

How many had come down here, over the many centuries? There were plenty of bones littering the bottom of the cavern. Who had these people been, once?

All for the Dragon’s Eye. He was beginning to hate the relic. Was it worth the risk?

It is, for Essix.

Conor huffed loudly. “I thought it was too easy.”

“We should have tried the chains,” said Meilin. “Better than getting eaten by these things.”

“With Uraza I might have been able to jump it,” Abeke said. “But that wouldn’t have helped the rest of you much. We’re down here now, and we need to find a way across.”

Rollan stared at Abeke. “What did you just say?”

“We need to find a way across?” she replied, puzzled.

“No, before that. About Uraza ...” Rollan glanced upward. “How far is it to the ledge? Far enough that you could release Uraza there?”

Abeke squinted. “It’s farther than I’ve ever sent her...” she said. “But I think I could make it. Why?”

Rollan held out his spear. “I have this. Conor’s got a staff. With Uraza’s help, Abeke could *walk* across, using these as stilts. It’s not far.”

“*Stilts?*” Conor didn’t look convinced. “It’s far enough.”

Rollan undid his belt and measured about three feet of spear. That would be enough to keep away from the ants. “It doesn’t matter. Give me your stick, Conor.”

If Conor wasn’t convinced, then neither was Meilin. “And what are the rest of us meant to do?”

“Ride on my back, of course!” said Abeke, brightening to the idea. “I’ll carry you over one at a time. Once I get you to the far wall, start climbing.”

Abeke stretched out over the lip of the rock she was standing on, extending her arm as far as she dared. “Here goes ...” There was a flash of brightness that illuminated the cave, revealing even more teeming ants than Rollan had realized were on the cavern floor.

Uraza appeared on the far ledge. The leopard searched the rock around her, momentarily confused to find herself alone. Then she glanced down at Abeke and the others, far below in the pit. Uraza keened nervously, stalking back and forth across the ledge.

“We’ll be there in a moment!” Abeke called up. “But I need your help, girl. Every bit of grace you can give me!”

Uraza sank to her stomach, staring hard at Abeke with her violet eyes.

“There is no way this is going to work,” said Conor. But he handed over his staff and helped Rollan tie it to Abeke’s leg. The girls lent scarves, and after a few minutes Abeke had the spear and the staff strapped to her legs. Both were tied on at two places, once at the foot and the other just below the knee.

“Knot them as tightly as you can,” Abeke instructed. “They’ve got to take the weight of two of us without me sliding down.”

“Got it,” said Conor, adding an extra knot.

Rollan double-checked with a pull. It all looked good. “Lift her up.”

The ants rippled around the base of the stilts as Abeke was tilted into the air. She swung her arms around in circles as she steadied herself.

She swayed wildly for a moment, the sticks clattering as she tried to keep standing. Rollan worried she wouldn’t be able to walk the whole distance in one go, but then with a deep breath, her footing grew steadier.

“Lightest first,” she said, still clinging to Rollan’s fingers.

Meilin shuffled closer. “I might as well get this over and done with.”

“Up onto my shoulders,” Abeke said.

“Do you think you can carry me?”

“Only one way to find out,” she replied cheerfully. Rollan didn’t need Essix’s help to see that she was trying to hide her fear.

“Nice and easy, Abeke,” said Conor. “Just get your balance first.”

Meilin settled herself, with the help of Conor.

The knots slid an inch, but held.

If he hadn’t been so terrified, Rollan would have laughed. He helped Abeke to turn around, so she was at least facing the right way. With any luck she’d stumble just far enough to drop Meilin to the ledge.

Ants crunched under each step. Rollan could see a few latch on, digging their mandibles into the hard wood.

Abeke looked as if she was sweating already, but she took a few more steps. “This must be how the rest of you feel all the time,” she joked. “I’ll never laugh at you for tripping ever again.”

“This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,” said Meilin, perched on her shoulders.

Rollan couldn’t disagree.

Step, stumble, trip. The stilts clacked and crunched across the floor. By moving slowly, Abeke could make it to one rock, rest against it a few moments, then push herself toward the next, zigzagging her way across.

It was working.

A cheer from Meilin announced that they’d made it. She wriggled off, accidentally kicking Uraza’s head in her scramble to get up onto the narrow ledge.

Abeke turned around.

“I might just be getting the hang of this!” Freed of the weight of another person, she crossed back to the boys in half the time. “You next, Rollan.”

Rollan nodded, took a deep breath, and climbed up. “Hope all these muscles don’t weigh you down too much.”

Trip, trip, slip, and stumble, but now that Abeke knew the route, she made quicker time. Rollan tried not to be offended that his weight didn’t seem to bother her. Sooner than last time, they were by the opposite wall. Abeke had even managed to bypass one of the stopping points.

Rollan attempted a bit more grace than Meilin had mustered while climbing the ledge. He failed. By the time he was seated beside Uraza, Abeke had already made it back to Conor.

“Come on,” she said.

Conor paused. Rollan realized that the Euran boy was probably the heaviest of all of them. With a shrug, Conor slowly climbed up.

Abeke almost collapsed. “Empty those rocks from your pockets first!”

“I haven’t got any!”

The knots slipped another inch or two.

“Then how can you be that heavy?”

Conor sniffed. “Muscle mass. Now giddy-up.”

Off they went, but with each step the knots loosened some more. Even worse, Rollan could see that the scarf on Abeke’s left foot was unraveling faster, tilting the two perilously to one side. Conor tried to compensate by clambering more onto Abeke’s right shoulder.

The weight on her neck must have been agonizing. Breath hissed between her clenched teeth, but she was going to make it.

Then Abeke screamed.

Beside Rollan, Uraza leaped to her feet, her yowl echoing throughout the cave. Abeke winced, glancing down at her shin.

“The ants!” she shouted.

They’d climbed the stilts, and the boldest were making their way up her boot. Abeke stomped down hard to try and shake them off. A few fell, but more hung tenaciously on.

Rollan’s heart leaped as he watched his friends teetering so close, but so far. Too many Greencloaks had died for him already. He couldn’t bear to see Abeke and Conor swallowed by ants for him and Essix. “Abeke, come on!” Rollan hollered, straining his hand out.

But it was too much to handle. The weakened knots, the weight of Conor, the ants. Abeke missed her next rock and the right stilt pitched hard. Suddenly both she and Conor were tilting. Conor tried to grab a nearby rock, but only brushed his fingers along it.

A hand shot past Rollan’s face, locking around Abeke’s collar. Rollan saw Meilin straining to hold their friends up as she gripped Uraza by the tail. The cords in Meilin’s neck stood out, and Uraza looked about as unhappy as he’d ever seen her, but it had bought them some time.

Rollan quickly wrapped his arms around Meilin’s waist and pulled. Together, they put every ounce of will into pulling their fellow Greencloaks out of the sea of ants.

With a terrified bellow, Conor jumped off Abeke and clawed his way onto the ledge.

Relieved of his weight, Meilin easily pulled Abeke up, even as the knots on her stilts finally frayed apart.

“The ants!” she shouted, and the three others quickly swatted them off and tossed them away. Abeke’s calves were bright red and bleeding from the small bites, but she was alive. Miraculously, they all were.

Conor grinned at her. “Nice job, pony girl.”

Uraza glared at him, rubbing her face against Abeke’s arm, but the girl merely laughed.

“*Neigh!*” she said.



FALLS

“**W**HAT IS THAT NOISE?” ASKED MEILIN. “IT SOUNDS LIKE thunder.”

Rollan paused to listen. “Underground?”

Meilin checked on her companions. Abeke was retying the bandage around Conor’s ankle. Rollan looked anxious. How much time had passed? Was it an hour, or did they still have time to get back and save Essix?

But they couldn’t go back empty-handed. They needed the Dragon’s Eye.

Then what? Meilin hated the idea of Song having her hands on something so powerful, yet she couldn’t allow Essix to be killed. It was bad choices either way.

Conor stood up and tested his weight on his injured foot. “That’s not too bad.”

Abeke agreed. “The swelling’s gone down. And nothing’s broken.”

Meilin gestured along the tunnel. “Shall we move on?”

The noise grew louder, from a thunder to a deafening roar. The tunnel itself filled with mist as they moved cautiously along. The walls and ceiling dripped moisture, collecting in puddles.

Then, foot by foot, the tunnel ended and the source of the cacophony was revealed.

Rollan gasped. “Wow.”

A waterfall roared just before them. Meilin and the others stood in a side exit, winding out from behind the fall. The tumbling wall of water cascaded down, creating the earsplitting din.

Meilin peered up, trying to find the source of all this power. “There must be a crack in the roof of this cavern. There are plenty of rivers draining out into the sea; this one’s just underground.”

Abeke balanced on the lip of the tunnel opening, looking over. “There’s a pool down below.”

That made sense. Meilin nodded. “It collects there, running off through other cracks into the sea.”

Conor hobbled up beside her. “The last challenge?”

“Let’s hope so.”

There was something else down there. Through the ever-changing sheet of water, Meilin could see there was some sort of platform far below, too neat and angular to be natural. And what was on it? A mosaic? But of what? She could just about make out two figures, both with some sort of scaled skin. One was a creature, the other a man. A scaled man?

No, it wasn’t skin but armor, the scale mail worn by Zhongese warriors from centuries past. And the creature was a water dragon—just like the one she’d seen out on the beach—but this creature was immense.

“If the Dragon’s Eye is anywhere, it’ll be here,” she said. “That’s a shrine below. Dedicated to the ancient hero who created the bond token.”

Conor brightened. “Then let’s climb down and grab it.”

“Will you mangle with that leg?”

“It’s not like I have any choice, is it?”

Meilin glanced over the edge. It was a long way down. Water trickled over the rocks, making each one slippery. She worried for Conor. For all of them, really.

Rollan was already dangling over the ledge, looking for somewhere to plant his feet. “We can’t waste time up here.” Purchase found, he started his descent. Abeke followed and then Conor, winking first. Meilin sighed and took a deep breath.

Don’t think about the distance, the drop. Take it one inch at a time.

Water sprayed over her back as she took to the rocks. It ran between her fingers and along her arms until she was soaked through—and she hadn’t even gone ten feet. Meilin didn’t look down to check the others. She needed to concentrate on footholds and handgrips on the route down.

The noise of the water tumbling past, just a few feet away, vibrated all the way through to her bones.

Meilin had always been a talented climber. Heights never really bothered her—until their encounter with the Dasat of Nilo. Now unbidden images assailed Meilin, of archers aiming at her from below. She saw rocks tumbling from above.

And worst of all, she saw herself falling: except this time there was no Heart of the Land to save her.

Meilin's fingers ached.

How much farther?

"Hey! Meilin! You all right?" shouted Conor.

"No. Not really," muttered Meilin, resting her forehead against the cliff face.

"What?"

"I'm fine!"

"It's not much farther, that's all."

She just wanted it to be over. Meilin glanced down.

Her head swam. The others were waiting on the platform, waving up at her, but it looked like miles away!

She felt as if she hadn't moved at all, imagining the ledge was just a foot above her.

But it wasn't. It was just as far above her as the ground was below. She'd frozen in the middle of the climb.

Take a moment, gather yourself, then continue.

But Meilin couldn't force herself to move. Her fingers were numb, both from the effort of gripping and the cold water washing over them. Her soaked-through clothes weighed her down, so each limb moved sluggishly.

Panic set in. Meilin's heart raced. She couldn't still her hands from shaking. It was too far.

"You can do it, Meilin!" yelled Abeke.

She wanted to shout back at them to leave her alone!

Meilin stared at her left hand, forcing it to open. One by one, her fingers unclenched and she moved to a lower hold.

That's it. One ledge at a time.

There were plenty. She stretched out a foot, first balancing on the tips of her toes, then setting down her whole foot.

There. Now—

She cried out as her foot fell away underneath her. Her grip went and suddenly Meilin was hanging on by two fingers.

Abeke screamed.

Meilin stared at her hand. Water poured over her fingers and down her arm, dripping off her soaking sleeve. She saw the cracks along the wall and wondered why she hadn't picked a better place to hold on. She gasped as the water pounded against her.

Then, with awful inevitability, she watched as her fingers slipped from the rock.

Meilin's hold failed, and she was struck by the full power of the falling river as she tumbled into the cold, dark water.



She slammed into the pool hard. The momentum of the water spun her over and over, pushing her down deeper.

Meilin fought back, but it was no use; the churning waters totally dominated her. She forced her mouth closed, so as not to gulp in a mouthful of water. She needed what little breath she had. Meilin didn't know which way was up. She couldn't see anything in the surging mass.

Then a hand grabbed her. She instinctively latched onto the thick wrist as she was pulled.

Who was it? Conor?

But her hair covered her face, and she put all her energy into kicking along.

Meilin's lungs burned. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on. What if Conor drowned, too?

Then she broke the surface and gasped. How sweet the air tasted! It cooled her chest as more hands took hold and pulled her fully out of the water.

Coughing and gasping, Meilin lay down on the stone. She'd never been more thankful for solid ground!

As she wiped the water from her eyes she glimpsed a large figure sitting beside her.

"Kofe?" she sputtered. "You're alive!"

"Seems so."

"Thank you," she said. "You saved me."

"Wasn't me. Not with this." He showed her his bandaged leg. Seemed Kofe had also had some trouble on the rocks. "It was him who saved you."

Confused, Meilin got to her feet. She was shivering in the chill of the cavern, but she was alive. “Him? Who?”

“Him.”

She turned around.

The figure wore ancient scaled armor, the metal shimmering brilliant green and gold. He carried a curved sword with a jade handle in an ornate sheath made of black serpent skin. His long, dripping black hair hung over half his face, but he smiled at her.

Enjoy your swim, young lady? The man spoke Zhongese, but in a dialect she didn't recognize.

“Who are you?” Meilin hacked. She was still coughing up water.

I should ask who you are, disturbing my rest.

“Rest?” Meilin asked, dazed. How was there someone living down here? It felt as if her head was full of water. If she tilted sideways, maybe it would all pour out.

“Uh ... Meilin,” Conor interrupted. He and the others were climbing into the cavern from the water, looking about as bedraggled as Meilin felt. “We can't hear anything that guy is saying. I think he's probably ...”

Meilin's mouth fell open as realization dawned.

The man smiled softly. *I am Xin Kao Dai, the guardian.*

“The guardian?” she asked. “Of what?”

He pulled back his hair, revealing the hidden half of his face. *Of this.*

Meilin gasped.

The man's left eye was a brilliant emerald.

They'd found the Dragon's Eye.



I called her Dancer Across Moonlit Waves, said the guardian, gesturing to the water dragon image at their feet. *Dancer for short.*

Meilin shook her head. “She must have been enormous. I've never see a water dragon so large.”

The guardian merely shrugged. *We had many great adventures together. I lost my eye in one of them. Truth be told, I thought my adventuring days were over. But then we discovered the secret of bond tokens. A grateful emperor, I forget his name, had given me this jewel for saving his daughter, whose name I've also forgotten.* The spirit smiled sheepishly. *It seemed a fitting item to become our token. The Dragon's*

Eye was rather special. It not only made me more powerful, but Dancer, too.

Meilin sat cross-legged, captivated. She'd called out Jhi, and the giant panda was now wrapped around her, warming Meilin. All around her, her friends watched the spirit, while Conor helped tend to Kofe's leg.

"You said your name is Xin Kao Dai," Meilin said. "But that's the name of this city."

They named a whole city after me? How embarrassing. The spirit ducked his head humbly, but Meilin still thought he looked a bit pleased with himself.

"To be honest, your name was lost to time," Meilin said. "But the legends of you and your spirit animal have lived on. You know how to make bond tokens?"

Of course. That's something I haven't forgotten. I recorded the method, though of course it's extremely dangerous. The scroll still sits in a jade tube within my chambers.

Meilin sat up. "Please," she said, "come with us. Help us defeat Song. The Oathbound have other bond tokens, stolen from our order. We can't let her have the Eye."

My time has gone, Meilin, said the guardian sadly. *Dancer swims in a distant sea, far beyond this world. I've been waiting to join her. What marvels we'll see there.*

Meilin heard the longing in his voice. She knew how powerful a spirit animal bond could be—just the feeling of Jhi pressed against her filled her with reassurance. Yet the guardian talked about it with such ache that she felt tears growing. "Why haven't you joined her?"

I've been waiting. He laughed. *For you, apparently. Not quite the heroes I had in mind, but the Great Panda Jhi is with you. I feel entirely happy. You will do well.*

"We can't take your eye!" exclaimed Meilin. "It's, well, your eye!"

Xin Kao Dai sighed. *The things I wish to see are beyond mortal sight, young lady.* He stood up and faced the waterfall. *We must not linger, small warrior. You have places to be, as do I.*

"Yes," Meilin responded with little enthusiasm. "We've still got to get all the way back."

The guardian smiled. *There is a secret route back to the entrance. It would be unfair to force you to go through the trials all over again in reverse.*

“Secret route?” asked Meilin, feeling more relieved than she could have imagined. The climb down had almost done her in, and the prospect of having to climb back *up* had chilled her through. “Where?”

The guardian clapped once.

The sound echoed around the tall underground cavern, multiplying again and again, until it sounded from all directions. It was as if hundreds of hands were clapping, thousands even.

The water parted. It did not stop, nor lessen in power, but separated into two jets, opening up a gap right into the cliff face.

And a large doorway. Lights shone from within.

“You live there?” asked Meilin.

When there was no reply she looked around.

The guardian had vanished.

The others were just as bewildered, but Rollan stepped toward the new opening. “Essix is running out of time.”

The chamber behind the waterfall was immense. Statues lined either side of the doorway. Meilin and the others entered in solemn silence. There was a single light shining from the darkness of the roof, but Meilin couldn’t work out the light source. It shone steadily upon a throne of pure white jade.

Supported by Conor and Rollan, Kofe limped behind. He took a deep breath and let out a low whistle. “Will you look at that?”

Upon the throne sat a dusty skeleton in rusted scale armor. In one hand, the figure held a sword, in the other an ornate scroll tube.

And within the eye socket of the skull rested a glowing green gem.

The Dragon’s Eye.



THE DRAGON'S EYE

“**W**HERE ARE THEY?” DEMANDED SONG. “THEY’RE UP to something. I know they are.”

She shifted her attention to the hour candle. There wasn’t much of it left.

Had they failed, too?

Song spun around at the Oathbound. “You must go in and find me the Dragon’s Eye. Now. That’s an order!”

Sid shifted awkwardly. He gazed over at Kana.

“Don’t look at *her*,” Song snapped. “I am in charge. Do as I say.”

Kana approached. “Song, there’s still time on the candle. They may still return with the Dragon’s Eye.”

“They had better,” muttered Song.

Cordelia leaned against the cavern wall, the Wildcat’s Claw unsheathed. The Heart of the Land hung from Kana’s neck, and Sid wore the Stormspeaker crown with a look of smug satisfaction.

Song circled the chamber jealously. This plan had been her idea, and yet *she* was the one without a bond token. What had the Oathbound done to garner such treasures? Merely followed her orders. They had sacrificed nothing.

A sharp pain cut her heart as she thought of her father.

That had been necessary. He was a weak ruler and a merciless father. Zhong would become great again with her on the throne.

The throne ...

She didn't dare tell the others, but the nightmares were getting worse. They were coming every night now, getting stronger, more vivid, *bloodier*.

He would be sitting there, on the throne, covered in those awful wounds. He would just sit there, looking at her with cold, accusing eyes.

Song wanted to destroy the throne, to toss it through the window and let it sink to the bottom of the sea. It would be cathartic, but she suspected it wouldn't stop the dreams. Her father would just appear again, elsewhere. She heard his footsteps in the corridors, glimpsed him from the corner of her eye. She'd see him momentarily walking along the gardens, blood dripping on the flowers.

He could be here right now....

"I did what I had to do, don't you understand that?" she muttered.

"Song?" Kana frowned. "Did you say something?"

"Where are they?" snapped Song.

The falcon shrieked from her cage.

"Oh, shut up," Song said exasperatedly. "You're even worse than Seaspray!" Kana put her hand on Song's arm, and she flinched. She cast her gaze over at the candle. "They don't have long."

"Why so impatient? You want the Dragon's Eye, don't you?"

"What sort of question is that?" Song faced Kana. "It's my destiny to have it. I have a water dragon, just like the ancient hero. I've read the old stories of what he did, what the Eye is capable of." She smiled. "Once I have it, no one will be able to stand against me."

Kana frowned. "Don't you mean *us*? Remember our deal, Song. We've been planning this together. If it wasn't for the Oathbound, your father would still be emperor."

Song had to be careful. She still needed Kana and the Oathbound.

For now.

"Of course," Song said, the tension dropping from her shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Kana. Forgive my impatience. You must think I've lost my mind. It's just that victory is so close. To think the Dragon's Eye was under our noses this whole time."

She placed a hand on the Oathbound captain's shoulder. "You're my best friend. You've always been there for me, and I'll do the same for you. But to make *all* our dreams come true, we'll need the Dragon's Eye."

Kana's eyes narrowed. "What can it do, exactly?"

“It’ll help us destroy our enemies once and for all. Starting with the wretched Greencloaks.”

Kana shook her head. “I don’t understand. The Greencloaks are *already* defeated. How will this destroy them?”

“The Dragon’s Eye gives you power over the sea, Kana. Can you imagine? The stories tell us that—”

“They’re just stories, Song. Probably exaggerated a hundredfold over the years. The bond tokens are powerful, but not *that* powerful.”

“*Yours* might not be. But the Dragon’s Eye is the most powerful of them all. And it was forged from a bond with a water dragon, just like mine. The ugly lizard might end up being useful for something at last.”

Kana looked at her worriedly. “You’ve won, Song. Once we have all the bond tokens, we need to consolidate your position, not seek out more enemies.”

“I have only ‘won’ when I’ve *destroyed* all my enemies,” Song replied. Was Kana going soft? Perhaps Cordelia should lead the Oathbound.

Sid coughed loudly. “The candle’s gone out.”

So it had.

“Get the cage, Sid,” Song ordered.

Sid looked over at Kana. Again.

Song gritted her teeth. “Didn’t you hear me?”

Kana gave a slight nod and Sid picked up the cage. Essix flapped her wings against the bars; she knew she was in danger.

A Great Beast? Well, they’d find out how “great” she was when they threw her into the sea.

Perhaps it was for the best that Meilin had failed. Ever since the defeat of the Devourer, Song had followed the successes of the young Heroes of Erdas, marveling at how a group of children could achieve so much in so short a time.

If she was honest, Song had been a little afraid of the young Greencloaks. When she’d first learned of them—how they’d visited the Great Beasts and collected their talismans—she’d thought the stories merely that: stories. Then they’d defeated the Devourer and there was no denying their abilities.

Was that when Song had first thought about her own ambitions? She was the daughter of the Emperor of Zhong. She should be greater than

Meilin, yet it was the younger girl whose fame covered Erdas from Amaya to Stetriol. Hers and the others': Abeke, Rollan, and Conor.

How could a mere servant and shepherd be more renowned than Song?

But their story had ended today.

"Take the bird to the cliff top," she ordered. "Then throw her into the sea."

"You will hand her back to me, right now."

Rollan stood in the cavern doorway, arms folded across his chest. Meilin, Abeke, Conor, and even the elder Greencloak Kofe were beside him, all alive!

Conor limped forward and his clothes were singed, but otherwise none of them looked badly injured. Song was almost disappointed. How could they all have survived?

It was obvious.

Song narrowed her eyes. "You've failed."

Meilin held out her fist, then opened it.

Song gasped.

An emerald glowed in her palm. Light radiated from its many cut faces, bathing the cavern in green, shifting pools.

"The Dragon's Eye?" Song whispered, her heart racing. Could it really be?

"Release Essix," demanded Rollan. "Now."

Song couldn't take her eyes off the glowing gemstone. It was smaller than she'd imagined; the drawings had made it so grand-looking, but it was smaller than a pigeon egg.

How could such a small thing have so much power?

"Give it to me."

"Essix first."

Song flicked her hand to Sid. "Open the cage."

The nod from Kana was almost imperceptible, but it was there.

Song's guts twisted. Kana was getting ideas above her station.

Essix flew across the cavern to Rollan, landing on his outstretched arm. The boy stroked the bird's crest. The love they had was unmistakable.

Song didn't feel that way toward her own spirit animal, but Seaspray wasn't a Great Beast.

Suddenly Essix's wings rippled. The gyrfalcon disappeared with a flash, leaving her mark on Rollan's chest.

Jealousy dripped into her heart like black bile. Sometimes it seemed so thick she almost choked. Song often felt as if she had nothing—nothing of value or importance. She was the only child of the emperor, yet it was others who had what she wanted. Her “legendary” spirit animal had always disappointed her father, while these four nobodies had summoned the Great Beasts. Song had a palace, an empire, but the Greencloaks' fame was boundless.

And they had the loyalty of each other. Song had the Oathbound, loyal only to gold. All across Erdas, minstrels sang of the feats of the Heroes of Erdas, of their bravery. No one sang about what she'd achieved.

Did they not understand the courage it had taken to murder her own father?

That would all change. Soon all Erdas would admire Song. Minstrels would write epics of her greatness. Song the Great. She liked the sound of that.

And she needed only one small thing to realize all her ambitions. Song thrust out her hand. “Give me the gem.”

Reluctantly, Meilin passed it over.

“At last,” said Song. “At last.”

She held the stone up and turned it in the light.

Something swirled within the gem, as though there was life within the Eye. It moved in endless, weaving patterns. If she squinted, it could almost be a water dragon, one made of pure light.

“It will do you no good.”

She turned to face the big Greencloak, Kofe.

His leg was bandaged, and blood soaked through the cloth. He looked pale, but the anger in his eyes filled him with strength.

“Oh?” Song asked mockingly. “Tell me why.”

“The bond tokens aren't the treasures you think they are or hope them to be.”

“They will make me powerful beyond all others,” said Song.

“They will corrupt you,” Kofe snarled. “Just as all power corrupts. *You* are the very proof of it.”

Song tightened her grip on the Eye. “I won't be lectured on the corrupting influence of power by a *Greencloak*. Your people have kept

Erdas under your thumbs for centuries. My father kept me meek and powerless my entire life. *No more!*”

“I knew your father, Song,” Kofe said. “He was a fool. He belittled those he feared and envied. That includes the Greencloaks and it includes *you*, his own child.” Kofe’s face softened slightly, the hard lines easing. “You summoned a *wondrous* partner, but rather than foster your love for each other, your father drove you and your spirit animal apart. You don’t need to covet the greatness of others, Song. Cherish your own bond. See the great things *you already have* for what they are.”

Song paused, considering the Greencloak’s words. Then she grinned and held up the Dragon’s Eye. “What I *have* is the most powerful weapon in Erdas. And I intend to use it.”

Kofe’s eyes darkened. “Then you are as much a fool as your father. You must be stopped.”

“Oh? And by who? You?” Song laughed. The man could barely stand. “Do you want to try?”

“There’s no need. You’ll bring ruin upon yourself; it’s only a matter of time. What concerns me is the damage you’ll inflict on innocents before your own doom descends.”

“Careful, old fool. You dare threaten an empress?”

“Your father—”

“Shut up about my father!”

Kofe limped forward. “You must listen. He has poisoned y—”

Song screamed with blind fury.

It happened almost instantly.

Kofe took another stride toward her, and Cordelia flicked out the Wildcat’s Claw. She jumped forward, raising the sword as she moved.

Kofe turned, staring as the flames erupted along the steel, illuminating the wild, terrifying delight in Cordelia’s eyes.

He raised his arms to protect himself, but how could he, against the Claw?

“No!” yelled Rollan.

Song covered her face. She expected a cry. A shout. Instead, it was deathly silent.

She looked.

Kofe stood, transfixed. He was clutching Cordelia, as if about to embrace her or crush her. He trembled. Blood trickled down his lips.

Cordelia faced him, both hands on the hilt.

The blade tip stuck out Kofe's back.

Slowly Cordelia drew the whole length of the sword out of his chest. Only then did Kofe drop to his knees.

Rollan rushed to the man's side. "No ..."

"He—he brought it upon himself," Song stuttered as she stepped back from the pool of blood that was now spreading across the floor. "It was his own fault."

Rollan groaned as he put his head against Kofe's. The big man's eyes fluttered as the last of his life drained away.

Rollan stared up at her, his own eyes wide with sorrow and rage. "He was a good man."

"He was nothing," snapped Song. "And now he is even less."

She watched as the other Greencloaks gathered to Rollan. Meilin put her arm around him and joined him in tears. Conor knelt down on the opposite side of Kofe and softly closed his eyes. Abeke held the man's hands.

Watching the Greencloaks gather to mourn one of their own, Song felt suddenly and strangely alone.

Was there anyone who cared about her in this way?

She saw her reflection in the bloody pool. How twisted she looked, how grotesque: soaked through by crimes she'd committed. The image swam. It distorted into ...

Into the face of the emperor.

"No!"

Kana gripped her arm, suddenly bleeding into existence beside her. "Song. Are you all right?" she whispered. "Pull yourself together."

Song blinked, shaking off the strange vision. What was she doing? Why should she be upset? She had the Dragon's Eye. She'd won.

Won!

She smiled at Kana. "I'm fine. But thank you."

"What should we do with them?" Kana asked. "Back to the cells?"

What indeed? It would take a mere nod of her head to have the Oathbound finish off the four children. No effort at all.

Perhaps she *should* kill them. They knew too much to ever be set free. And they were powerful, though perhaps they didn't realize *how* powerful. If they joined her—joined the Oathbound—then maybe the Heroes of Erdas could still be spared.

But Song knew that was impossible. The look of pure hatred in Meilin's eyes made it clear.

More than anything, Song needed to prove she was right. Right to go after the bond tokens, right to use the Oathbound, right to arrange the murder of the emperor. Once she'd proven *that*—once Meilin saw her precious Greencloaks shattered, saw the true power of the Dragon's Eye—then Song would let Cordelia do what she did best.

Kana still stood beside her. "Let me take them back to the cells," Kana said. "They're no threat to you anymore."

"The cells can wait." Song couldn't take her eyes off the Eye. She finally had the one thing she'd been seeking this whole time. Now she would test it. She wanted the others to see what she was capable of.

"Bring them down to the beach."



ABEKE STOOD ON THE SHINGLE SHORE AND WATCHED Song summon her water dragon. The lizard appeared with a flash, then lay down to snooze on a sunny rock.

“Wake up!” Song kicked the animal. “Wake up!”

Abeke winced at the way Song treated her spirit animal. How could she be so cruel?

But Abeke could still picture the Oathbound guards dragging Kofe’s body away. More and more she was learning that cruelty was a part of Song’s true nature. The empress had hid it well, but now it was revealed and without restraint.

Song kicked poor Seaspray again, and it was too much for Abeke. She pushed past the guard who blocked her. “Stop it, Song!”

The guard thrust a halberd at her, stopping the blade just an inch from her chest.

Song waved him aside. “Let her approach.”

Abeke knocked the halberd away and marched up to the empress and her Oathbound allies.

Kana the Honest stood within arm’s length of Song. She kept her gaze on Abeke, ready for any sudden move. The Heart of the Land hung from her neck. Next to her stood Sid the Generous, wearing the Stormspeaker crown, along with countless other stolen jewels. He looked absurd with so much ornamentation, yet still his eyes gleamed hungrily at the jewel in Song’s hand. Finally there was Cordelia the Kind, grasping the deadly Wildcat’s Claw.

Song held up the Dragon's Eye. The jewel radiated a bright green light. "Magnificent, isn't it?"

"Stop beating your water dragon, Song. Can't you appreciate how lucky you are to have a spirit animal?"

"Lucky? To have this?" Song scoffed and the dragon cringed. Clearly he was used to Song's anger.

Abeke squatted down and brushed her hand over Seaspray's scales. He trembled, expecting another blow, but eventually he realized she wasn't going to hurt him and nuzzled up against her.

"You really are quite lovely." His scales shimmered like oil on water, one moment green, then gold, then orange and purple. The water dragon gurgled with pleasure.

"He's weak and useless," snapped Song. She undid the chain around her waist and latched it to the dragon's collar.

"What are you going to do?"

Song gave the chain a sharp tug. "Make him better."

"Don't hurt him!" Abeke wanted to protect poor Seaspray, but Kana stepped in her way.

"You stay right there," she warned.

The poor water dragon knew something was wrong. He struggled as Song dragged him to the water's edge.

The waves splashed around the empress and her spirit animal. Song didn't seem to care that her elegant silk robes were getting covered in salt water. Instead she hunched down in the waves and held the Dragon's Eye in front of her own spirit animal.

The light from the orb brightened, bathing both girl and dragon in an eerie green radiance. The water dragon stopped struggling and instead stared at the orb, hypnotized. The light from the Eye pulsed. Cold fear crept over Abeke's skin.

The waves seemed to hush and she held her breath.

Even the seagulls stopped their endless squawking. They fled the beach, sensing something disturbing.

"Come on ..." Song snarled. "Come on!"

The sky darkened as Seaspray began at first to twist, then thrash, at the end of the chain.

Song laughed as she held the Eye aloft. "That's it!"

"You're hurting him!" yelled Abeke.

Song didn't hear her. She stared, wide-eyed, at the dragon as he hissed in pain. Then he began to tremble all over, his scales undulating as the muscles and bones beneath began to strain. Seaspray threw back his head and cried out.

How could she do that to any creature, especially her own spirit animal?

Others came to the water's edge to watch Song and her water dragon. The creature thrashed violently in the waves.

Seaspray's cry throbbed as he swelled. His limbs twisted and buckled and grew. His tail splashed among the waves, thickening and lengthening.

Song laughed. "It's working! Can't you see?"

The water dragon rolled down the beach, as if trying to escape the pain racking his body. Song ran after him, still holding the Dragon's Eye ahead of her, its light concentrated on the lizard.

Abeke glanced to her sides.

Conor, Meilin, and Rollan all stood nearby, but the Oathbound were all totally focused on the spectacle.

She nudged Rollan. "Here's our chance."

Rollan peered sideways. "What's your idea?"

She tilted her head to a pocket of caves within the cliffs. "Hide out until dark. Then take one of those boats and try to get help."

"Go," he stated.

"I don't mean just me!" argued Abeke.

"You're the best runner. Go. Now."

"Rollan ..."

The water dragon sank under the water's surface. Song waded in. "Where is he?"

This was the best chance they'd have.

The soldiers entered the sea to help look for the dragon.

"Where is he?" Song screamed again, more forcefully.

A long, scaled spine rippled across the water. Some of the soldiers gasped; others hurried out to dry land.

Waves rose as something big swam toward the beach's edge.

The water dragon roared as he broke the surface and rose ... and rose.

Abeke gasped.

Song let out a triumphant shout. "I did it! I did it!"

The water dragon towered over her. Seaspray shook himself, covering the whole party in seawater.

Rollan glared at Abeke.

She nodded. Abeke slammed an Oathbound soldier aside and ran.

Uraza flashed onto the beach, then sprang forth with a terrifying roar. She swiped her claws along a soldier's leg, tearing off the armor plate as if it were paper. Her claws dug an inch into the flesh, enough to draw blood, a scream, and a tumble.

"Go, Uraza!" Abeke yelled, but the Great Beast was already far ahead of her, sprinting over the pebbles with all the speed and grace she had held in her supple body.

Despite herself, Abeke laughed. If only she could draw on more than a fraction of Uraza's power! Still, seeing her animal surge ahead encouraged Abeke to add more energy to her legs. She drew on their bond and felt her own steps growing long and sure.

There were a series of cave openings along the southern curve of the cliffs. That part of the beach was covered in huge chunks of rock, debris that had been eroded off the cliffs. Abeke could jump them easily and have plenty of places to hide.

Uraza was leaping from rock to rock. Abeke saw her tail disappear between two larger boulders, before the leopard dashed into one of the caves.

A quarrel zipped past. Abeke glanced back and saw Conor barge into the crossbowman as he reloaded. Briggan leaped from one target to another, snapping and clawing wildly at anyone foolish enough to get too near. Even Jhi was causing chaos, knocking a man to his knees with heavy swipes of her paws. Meilin had wrestled a sword from Brunhild the Merry and was doing what she'd spent years training to do, fighting extremely well. Rollan had gathered big pebbles and was hurling them with frightening accuracy. The big stones clanged off helmets and bashed a few noses. Sid yelled at his wolverine to attack, but the big beast hung back, snarling and clawing wildly as Essix swooped overhead, raking her talons across the beast's fur.

They were giving Abeke the chance to escape; she couldn't let them down.

Armored feet crunched the pebbles behind her as Song's warriors gave chase. But they wore heavy brass accessories and carried weapons,

and Abeke was fleet-footed and unencumbered. Her heart pounded as she picked up the pace.

Behind her, the dragon roared again but she didn't pause to look. Her entire attention was on the route ahead. Abeke sprang onto a rock just as another quarrel clattered past. Then she jumped from one slab to another, leaving her pursuers farther and farther behind with each leap. Behind her, Oathbound goons slipped and fell, unable to haul themselves onto the rocks. So much of their armor was for show, Abeke couldn't help but find it amusing that their vanity had let her escape.

One final leap took her clear of the beach and into the cave's mouth.

Without pausing to catch her breath, Abeke charged in.

"Uraza? Where are you?"

There was no sign of her leopard. Had Abeke gone into the wrong cave? Or was Uraza farther in?

Glancing back, Abeke caught a glimpse of the Oathbound. She couldn't risk going back out now. Hoping Uraza was indeed ahead, she delved into the cavern.

The cave floor was broken by rock pools and the walls dripped with water and seaweed. Deeper and deeper she went. The cries of the soldiers disappeared.

A soft growl greeted her from the shadows ahead. She saw a glimmer from a pair of bright violet eyes.

Abeke sighed. "There you are. I've been—"

Then she turned a corner and stopped.

A figure emerged from behind a rock. "Hello, Abeke."

Abeke blinked as she recognized the person standing before her. "You!"



OLD FRIENDS

“**A**T LEAST ABEKE GOT AWAY,” SAID ROLLAN. “GIVES US some more elbow room.”

Meilin glanced over at him. “Is that meant to be a joke?”

Rollan smirked. “Come on, admit it. You were starting to miss this cell. The damp walls, the cold breeze. The rats for company.”

Meilin shook her head but didn’t answer.

“We have got to escape,” said Conor. He was back at his usual spot by the door, searching as if there were some secret latch which, with a twist, would grant them freedom.

He needs to be busy.

Rollan put his hand protectively upon his mark. He had Essix back and right now that felt like a win. It didn’t change their situation, but it gave him some small hope.

Where had Abeke gotten to? After their friend escaped, Song had been furious. She ordered the Oathbound soldiers to scour the caves, but the whole area was riddled with them, dozens of tunnels that had been carved out by underground rivers. There had to be hundreds of miles to search. Rollan felt hopeful that Abeke would keep ahead of the Oathbound.

But Song hadn’t been angry for long. Not now that she had the Dragon’s Eye ...

“Did you see the water dragon?” Meilin asked bleakly.

Conor snorted. “How could I miss him?”

When Song had ordered Seaspray back out of the water he had crawled, exhausted, to collapse in the shingles. But the lizard was now the size of an ox. Something about the ancient bond token had changed him. If Rollan was honest, the whole thing reminded him of the Bile and the way it transformed the animals who were forced to drink it.

As she watched her own spirit animal collapse, Song had stood over Seaspray, scowling in disgust. Then she'd summoned him into passive state—a newly enormous tattoo that stretched from her neck all the way to her ankle.

Meilin sighed, still gazing out the small grille. “I fear what she’ll do with such power.”

“Nothing good,” Rollan concluded. “The girl’s insane.”

They fell silent as they heard armored footsteps approach. A heavy fist beat against the door. “Food!”

The hatch at the bottom of the door slid open and a tray was shoved through.

Rollan picked up one of the three bowls. “What’s this?”

A face appeared at the small door grille. Wikam the Just sneered. “Food. You eat it. Or not. It makes no difference to me.”

“It looks like seagull droppings.”

“Is that not what you ordered?” Wikam frowned. “I must chastise the chef.”

“Great. You think you’re a comedian?”

Wikam tapped the bars. “What I am is on the *right* side of these. I can be whatever I want. Best eat up before it gets cold.”

He was still laughing as he left and closed the door at the far end of the corridor.

Rollan sniffed the meal; his stomach twisted in revulsion. A few bones floated in the sludge. He didn’t want to guess what animal they’d come from. Lumps of stale bread sat in the congealing mass. Rollan tested a lump. He swallowed it and had to close his eyes while trying not to gag.

When he opened them, he saw Conor had almost finished his bowl. “How can you eat that?”

“What? I’m hungry.” Conor wiped the last of the goo off with his fingers, then licked them clean. “I’m not saying I like it, but food is food.”

Meilin nibbled at hers, though her nose was wrinkled in disgust.

Rollan picked up a large piece of what might be meat and swallowed it whole, trying to get it down without touching any tastebuds on the way.

They ate in silence, each stuck in their own peculiar misery.

Rollan worked his way through his meal, reminding himself with every grueling bite that strength was all that mattered. He needed to keep his up, just in case a chance came along, as it had for Abeke.

But was that likely? The Oathbound would no doubt be watching them even more closely now.

Meilin finished her bowl then put her head in her hands. “That was the most disgusting thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“If Song’s still feeding us, she’s got something planned,” said Conor.

“Fattening us up for her dragon?” Rollan asked.

Conor waved to his empty bowl. “We’re going to need more than this to get fat, Rollan.”

The far door opened up again.

Rollan sighed. “Oh, good. Wikam’s brought us dessert.”

The footsteps paused outside the door. “Hey. Who’s in there?”

The three of them sat up. That wasn’t Wikam.

Rollan went to the door. “Who’s asking?”

“Rollan?”

Keys rattled and then there was the click-clack of the lock opening.

The cell door creaked open. A lantern shone into the cell.

And upon the face of their rescuer.

“So, who wants to get out?” asked Worthy, grinning.



ESCAPE

MEILIN RUSHED OUT AND HUGGED WORTHY. THE BOY was blushing when she stepped back, and she couldn't help but smile at his discomfort. "It's good to see you, Worthy."

"You too, Meilin."

Rollan and Conor greeted him with knocks and friendly slaps, but Meilin saw the stunned disbelief on their faces. They, like her, had never thought to see the young Redcloak ever again.

"What happened to Wikam?" asked Rollan, searching the narrow corridor.

Worthy gestured at the far door. "Abeke's taking care of him."

"Abeke?" Meilin exclaimed. "She's here?"

"Of course. How else did you think I'd find you so quickly? We, er, bumped into each other down in the caves." He started walking, tying on his pristine white cat mask as he moved. "But we can talk later. We need to get out."

The room beyond was Wikam's, and there they found Abeke, Wikam himself, and perhaps the hugest man Meilin had ever seen. He wore the robes of a Niloan chief, and she couldn't miss the large rhino tattoo on his forearm. He smiled as they appeared, while the Oathbound squirmed, trapped as he was under the man's foot. Wikam was gagged and bound, with a fresh bruise swelling on the side of his head. Across the room, his vulture was similarly trussed.

Worthy bowed at the big man. "May I introduce Chief Ugo. He's the reason I'm here."

“So these are the young heroes I’ve been hearing so much about. The tales do not do you justice,” said the chief.

Abeke shook the keys in front of her. “Help me put him in the cell. No one will come down till tomorrow.”

“And we’ll be long gone by then,” said Worthy.

“Let me help,” said Chief Ugo, easily picking up Wikam, who was not a slim man, with one hand through his belt. The Oathbound struggled and made noises, but the gag was thick and well-stuffed in his mouth.

They dropped him, not gently, into the cell, then tossed his vulture spirit animal in after him.

“Bye-bye,” said Abeke, with a wave. Then she locked the door.

They gathered back in Wikam’s quarters, where Ugo sat down on the stout wooden table. He folded his arms across his chest. “I’ll keep this brief. I’ve had my suspicions regarding the death of the emperor from the moment I heard about it. I know the Oathbound are respected for protecting the leaders during the Devourer’s war, but I’ve had my own dealings with them before, and I’ve seen the cruelties they impart when they think no one is watching. Though they’ve never tried anything quite so bold as killing an emperor.” Chief Ugo shook his head. “The idea that it was a Greencloak plot was laughable—especially one orchestrated by Olvan and the Heroes of Erdas. So here I am. I came to find out what’s going on. And, incidentally, to get you all out.”

Worthy pointed to himself. “Which was my idea.”

Meilin stepped forward and bowed. “Chief Ugo, the false Greencloaks who killed the emperor were Oathbound impostors acting on the orders of Empress Song. She wanted her father dead.”

She watched the Niloan chief’s face stiffen with shock. His black eyes narrowed. “Be careful, child. If what you say is true, we could be talking war.”

“War?” Meilin gasped. “But we just ended the one against the Devourer.”

“The other governments wouldn’t stand for such a coup.” The chief rubbed his chin. “But Abeke tells me that Song already has four powerful items of some kind, and that makes her doubly dangerous. Song knew that if her treachery was discovered she’d be challenged. That she did it anyway means something. She’s confident she can defeat the other nations, not to mention the Greencloaks. These ‘bond tokens’ must be incredibly powerful for her to have risked so much.”

“Another war would be disastrous for Erdas,” Meilin muttered. “And especially for Zhong.” Meilin had witnessed the loss of so much of her homeland already. To have it torn apart again was too much to bear. “There has to be another way.”

Chief Ugo stood. “I must take you all back to Nilo. The High Chieftain will want to hear the full story from your own lips. Worthy has told me what he knows on the journey here, but your word will be vital if Song is to face true justice.”

“How?” asked Conor.

“My ship is anchored a mile off the coast. Your red-cloaked friend also has a boat hidden in the caves along the bottom of the cliff. You will go with him and row out to the ship. My crew is expecting you.”

“What about you?”

The chief frowned. “It will look too suspicious for me to depart the palace in the middle of the night. I’ll follow at dawn, before anyone discovers what’s happened down here. With a good wind behind us, we’ll be swiftly out of reach from Song’s navy.”

“And off to start a war?” asked Meilin. “Is that what you want us to do?”

“I want you to tell the truth,” said the chief. “I’m sorry, but some things are greater than the concerns of four children, even ones partnered with the Four Fallen.”

Rollan stepped forward. “Song’s greatest weapons are the bond tokens, right?”

“She’s dangerous already, for who she is and what she’s done, but yes, the fact that she controls such powerful artifacts only amplifies the peril we are all in.”

“Then we can’t leave without them. We steal them tonight.”

Worthy sighed behind his mask. “I saw what was happening down at the beach. But does one big lizard really change anything? We need to get away.”

“No,” Meilin said. “Rollan’s right. We need to stop Song.”

Worthy shook his head. “Meilin ...”

If Meilin was being honest, she wanted to sail away. She knew the rest of them felt the same. It would be such a relief to get far away from here to somewhere safe.

But where was safe? Song and the Oathbound had grown powerful beyond belief. The Greencloaks were still imprisoned, and who knew

what Song could truly do with the Dragon's Eye?

Another war was looming on the horizon. Meilin couldn't be a part of that.

Chaos lay ahead of them. More strife and misery for all Erdas.

She met the chief's gaze. "All the gifts are in one place, the Summer Palace. We need to get them back."

The chief sighed and shook his head. "I wish I had time to argue with you over this, but I suspect I wouldn't get very far. I must get back to the main palace, before any of Song's spies know I'm missing." He looked to Worthy. "We sail at dawn. Make sure you're back on board by then. With or without your friends."

And with that the Niloan chief left.

Conor grinned nervously at Meilin and clapped his hands. "So, you've got a plan?"

"No," she replied. "I haven't got a clue."



TO THE BOAT

“**W**E CAN’T LEAVE THESE PEOPLE HERE,” SAID ABEKE, looking at the corridor of cells. It hadn’t been immediately clear how many others were trapped in Song’s prison. For most of the Greencloaks’ stay, the corridor had been deathly silent. Now Abeke saw why. The prisoners were listless and emaciated. Their eyes were tired and sunken with hunger.

Wikam had been starving them.

“We need to get them out,” Abeke said.

Meilin nodded. “But how?”

All eyes turned to Worthy. “My boat’s big enough for about six, comfortably.”

Abeke did a rough head count. “Apart from us there are ten others. If we get down to the caves, we can hide them. Row the first batch out to Ugo’s ship, then do another journey for the second. It will take some time, but it’s the only way.”

Conor’s eyes darkened. “Then just leave?”

“What do you mean?”

“Song and the Oathbound have the four relics, Abeke. Even if we escape, they still have all the power.”

Abeke shook her head. “It gives us time to plan.”

But it was a chance, wasn’t it? Abeke looked at each of her friends, then she smiled at Rollan. “Getting at least one of the bond tokens back would weaken Song’s power. And the Dragon’s Eye seemed to be the most powerful.”

Rollan clapped his hands. “Great. We grab the gemstone.”

Conor grinned. “I’m in.”

Meilin hesitated, but eventually nodded. “I visited the palace a few years ago with my father. I still remember the layout, more or less.”

Abeke patted Worthy’s shoulder. “You and me saving the prisoners?”

“That works.” Worthy hefted the keys. “Let’s get started.”

They crept along the row of cells, working open the heavy locks. People slowly emerged, though they were more than a little wary of this miraculous rescue.

After a brief explanation from Abeke and the others, they learned that two of the prisoners were soldiers who’d been blamed for conspiring in the emperor’s murder. They’d both been dedicated to Song’s father and expressed suspicion about the attack.

“Song had the Oathbound lay false evidence against us, saying we were in league with the Greencloaks,” muttered Chan. “I served her family for twenty years and this is where I end up.”

“The fight’s not over yet, brother,” replied Li. “The Greencloaks will reveal the truth behind our emperor’s death.”

Chan merely grunted, glancing suspiciously at Meilin.

There were three nobles, also locked up for voicing doubts over Song’s rule. And four of the prisoners were local merchants, robbed by the Oathbound and chained for complaining. Then, in the last cell ...

“Whee! Free! Free!”

Was the crazy old man.

He jumped out and hugged Abeke. “My savior!”

“Um, you’re welcome.” Abeke gently pushed him off. “But will you please be quiet?”

The old man clamped his hand over his mouth.

Abeke rejoined the others, curled in a circle with Worthy as they discussed their plans. “Worthy and I will get them away, but then what?”

Rollan bit his lip. “Give the rest of us an hour. If we aren’t back by then, go without us.”

Abeke didn’t like it, but Rollan was right. If at least she and Worthy could escape, then they’d be able to warn the other nations about Song. She smiled at him. “You’ll make it.”

“Robbing the Empress of Zhong of the most powerful relic in all Erdas? No problem.” Rollan winked. “Though my thieving credentials aren’t what they used to be.”

“Grabbing the Eye isn’t about thieving, it’s about being heroic.”

Rollan grinned. “That’s what I told myself the day I summoned Essix. I was stealing medicine for a friend.” Rollan’s face went pale. “Come to think of it, I got caught that day.”

Abeke wanted to swap places with one of her friends. Any of them. But she and Worthy had already navigated the caves, and time was pressing. She hugged the other three. “Don’t be late.”



It didn’t take long for the plan to go wrong.

Things started out fine. She, Worthy, and the other prisoners left the prison level, with her at the front and Worthy at the back. They reached the courtyard without anyone seeing them, then crept along the rear of the stable to the hay bales that were conveniently stacked up against the sea-facing outer wall.

Less convenient was the squad of Oathbound soldiers camped beside it.

“They weren’t there when we came over,” complained Worthy.

One of the soldiers, Li, smacked his fist into his palm. “We could rush them. Get a few of you over the wall while we keep them busy?”

Chan frowned. “That’s Captain Peng. Not good. The man’s cruel and dedicated to Song. He joined the Oathbound soon after the emperor’s death.”

Abeke drew back into the shadows of the stable roof. “There are almost twenty of them. All armed. We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Then we need another way out,” said Worthy.

They needed help.

Someone stealthy, good at sniffing out secret paths at night, someone like ...

With a flash and tingle upon her arm, out stepped Uraza.

The leopard shook from her head to the tip of her tail, then nuzzled against Abeke. She turned around to watch the soldiers at the wall. Uraza growled softly.

“I’d prefer not to fight,” said Abeke. “Too many of us are weak from imprisonment. We need to find another way out.”

Uraza didn’t think much of that. She revealed her claws, but Abeke met the cat’s violet eyes unflinching. “Please, my friend.”

Uraza gave a twitch of her long whiskers, then sniffed around. She then sprang fifteen feet in the air, up onto the stable roof, landing with barely a sound. She looked down at Abeke, and her tail twitched.

“Looks like we’re going up,” said Abeke.

Li patted his brother’s shoulder. “Let me go first, then we’ll help lift.”

Chan braced himself against the wall, and Li used him as a ladder. The younger brother stepped into Chan’s cupped hands, then quickly hopped to his shoulders before hauling himself up next to Uraza. He made it look easy.

Abeke grinned. “You’ve done this before.”

“Sometimes we missed curfew,” said Chan with a wink. “Sneaking back into the barracks is a time-honored tradition.”

Worthy went up next, scaling the wall without Chan’s help, thanks to his catlike abilities. Li looked a little put out, but the pair extended their hands downward. One by one, using Chan as a first step, the other prisoners were lifted onto the sloping roof, even the crazy old man.

Abeke patted Chan’s shoulder. “You go now. I’ll come up last.”

Chan frowned as he judged the height of the wall. “That’s quite a jump.”

“I’ve learned a few tricks from Uraza.”

Chan was heavier than he looked, but Abeke stayed steady as he climbed up on her shoulders and scaled the wall. He was no worse than Conor, really. Then she took a few steps back.

Li and Worthy dangled as low as they could, reaching down.

Abeke shook her head. “You’ve seen me jump, Worthy.”

“This is a lot higher, Abeke. I’m not sure even *you* could—”

Three quick, springy steps, and Abeke bounced up.

She landed lightly on her feet at the top of the wall, completely ignoring the hands that had been offered her. “You were saying?”

“Keep low,” grumped Worthy. “We’re silhouetted against the sky.”

Crouching low, Abeke made her way to the front of the line with Uraza. The big cat’s eyes shone in the dark. She waited, tail flicking with excitement. Then she headed off, constantly checking over her shoulder like a protective mother, making sure all her kittens were lined up behind her.

The roof creaked and a seagull squawked angrily when they stumbled near its nest. Abeke froze as voices rose from below, holding up her hand. A stable boy stirred in his sleep, Abeke could see him through a

crack in the tile. The boy was nestled under a blanket on a pile of straw. One of the horses looked up at her mid-chew. Abeke put her finger to her lips. The horse just stared blankly, then returned to its meal of oats.

The edge of the stable roof came close to the outer wall.

“I can’t jump that,” complained one of the nobles. “We need to find another way.”

“There isn’t time,” said Abeke. “And it’s not *that* wide. Only five feet.”

“I’m not doing it.” The nobleman folded his arms. “It’s a long drop.”

“Don’t think about the drop. Look, you could almost step over.”

He glared at her. “Do you know who I am?”

“The man who’s heading back to his cell if he doesn’t do what I say.”

“We must find another—yaah!”

The nobleman flew across, grabbing the side of the far wall as he landed.

Abeke stared at the crazy old man. “Did you just kick him in the backside?”

The old man lowered his foot guiltily. Then he took a step back and jumped over himself.

“Hey! What’s going on up there! You! Come down!”

The nobleman’s cry had alerted the Oathbound soldiers below. Now more were rushing toward them with spears.

“Jump!” Abeke shouted.

The rest of them leaped the gap as one of the soldiers hurled a spear. Abeke helped one of the prisoners over the side of the wall, then began looking for handholds.

The outer surface had been beaten by the elements for many years. Facing the sea, it had become pitted, cracked, and scratched. The once flat and seamless marble was now punctured by holes. The wall rested on a narrow cliff, but Abeke knew there was a path only a few yards farther. It led steeply down to Worthy’s hidden boat.

They needed to move.

Abeke and the others shuffled like crabs down the outer wall. Once they reached the bottom, Worthy did a head count before running off along the path. “This way!”

Abeke heard shouts from the other side of the cliff. The gates were on the opposite end of the palace, so the Oathbound soldiers were climbing up onto the stable roof themselves.

They'd be upon them in only a minute.

"Not much of a head start," she muttered to Uraza. Then she turned to the rest of the prisoners. "Go! Follow Worthy!"

A quarrel zipped over her head. Uraza roared angrily.

Two soldiers lined the wall and were reloading their crossbows.

Time to leave.

Uraza sprang along the path. Abeke grabbed the old man. "Hurry up!"

The soldiers were climbing down the wall now. They moved slowly, encumbered as they were.

They were almost there!

The boat bobbed in the water, tied to a rock less than five yards from the cliff face. The tide had come in some; Worthy waded up to his chest before climbing in.

"Got you!"

A hand grabbed Abeke's collar.

She spun and kicked out simultaneously, catching the soldier on the side of his knee. He cried out as he stumbled, but didn't let go. Another soldier was a few feet behind him.

Uraza pounced. She flew overhead, slamming her forepaws into the man's armored collar. The Oathbound cried out as he fell, knocking his head into a hard rock. He groaned as Uraza turned her attention to the line of soldiers descending the slope after them.

Worthy had untied the boat, and everyone piled in except for Li and Chan. They bobbed alongside and were clearly going to swim. Worthy waved frantically at Abeke. "Come on!"

Abeke swiped out both arms, ripping herself free of the soldier's grip. "Uraza!"

The leopard was causing havoc. She clawed and bit and jumped and weaved between the clumsy stabs of the Oathbound. The path was too narrow for more than one at a time, but Uraza pounced from ledge to rock, ducking in and out of the battle. Men and women fell over themselves trying to escape her, and more than one soldier clutched desperately at the cliff face to avoid dropping into the water in their armor.

"Come on, Abeke!" yelled Worthy. "Jump!"

The rowboat was already heading away. The other prisoners were also shouting for her to jump.

“Uraza! We’re leaving!” shouted Abeke. Then she took a deep breath and ...

A sharp blow connected with Abeke’s back, spilling the air from her lungs and sending her over the cliff. She hit the water hard. It was black and cold, and she sank straight down. She heard a dull splash somewhere to her right, then she attacked the water, beating it with her hands and feet to claw back to the surface.

Panic threatened to consume her.

An Oathbound soldier appeared beside her in the water. Abeke recognized the man Chan and Lin had called Captain Peng. His eyes were wild as he seized Abeke, wrapping his fingers around her wrist.

Abeke floundered. The soldier was pulling her lower!

Her cheeks swelled as what was left of her air bubbled out. The weight of the Oathbound drew her farther and farther below. It was black wherever she looked.

Then a second hand locked itself around Abeke’s other wrist. It pulled her upward with shocking strength.

With this new hand guiding her, Abeke could kick more confidently. She knocked Captain Peng in the head with her foot. The Oathbound’s grip loosened, then his weight disappeared completely. Abeke lost sight of Peng almost immediately. His pale hand was swallowed by the darkness.

Abeke concentrated on the pull of the other hand. After an agonizing few seconds, they broke the surface together.

“Worthy?” she gasped, after several long moments of grateful breathing. A wave crashed over her and she was almost pulled into the water again, but the strong hand dragged her up the ledge, beneath an overhanging rock.

Uraza appeared by her side, gently tugging her shirt. Abeke collapsed, relieved to have fresh air back in her lungs.

Blinking the water from her eyes, she saw Worthy’s boat far in the distance. They were way out now and weren’t coming back. Spears fell short as each stroke of the boat’s oars took it farther away.

Abeke sat up. If *that* was Worthy, then who ... ?

The crazy old man squatted beside her. He grinned. “Splishy, splashy. Abeke’s no fish!”

Abeke hugged him, and he responded with a short yelp of surprise.

“No, I’m not,” she agreed.



SONG'S QUARTERS

“**T**HE PALACE IS A LOT BIGGER THAN I THOUGHT,” SAID Conor.
Meilin nudged him along. “Take this left.”

He did as she told, but Conor felt they’d been down this corridor already. Despite Meilin’s protestations, they were very lost.

They carried on, keeping to the shadows, ducking into doorways and behind columns when they heard footsteps.

A gloomy ambience hung over the palace. The servants talked in hushed, wary tones and no one lingered.

Meilin frowned. “If it’s like this now, imagine what it’s going to be like after Song’s been in charge a year. Or a decade.”

“Where do you think she’s keeping the Dragon’s Eye?” asked Rollan.

Conor had wondered the same thing. “She’ll want it near her, that’s for sure. You saw the way the Oathbound are with the other bond tokens. Cordelia couldn’t stop fidgeting with hers.”

“Song’s personal chambers are that way,” said Meilin. “We could—quick!”

They ducked behind a doorway as armored footsteps clanged on the marble floor.

Conor’s ears twitched. He recognized the voices speaking.

“I’m worried about Song,” said Kana. “The stress is getting to her.”

“Oh, you noticed that too?” replied Sid. “Ranting about her dead father. She’s losing her mind.”

“Careful, Sid. She’s my oldest, best friend.”

There was a chuckle from Kana's companion. "But you know I'm right?"

"I can handle Song, but it's Cordelia I want to discuss," said Kana. "You've seen what she's like with the Wildcat's Claw. I don't trust her."

"No one trusts her," laughed Sid. "But what do you want done about her?"

"What do you think?"

There was a pause, then Sid replied more thoughtfully. "It won't be easy, but we could do it."

"Then sort it out. There are others who could use the Wildcat's Claw. Brunhild isn't likely to go on any rampages. Cordelia's been useful, but now she's a liability. We need to ..."

The rest was lost as they disappeared around the next corridor.

Conor shook his head. "I almost feel sorry for Cordelia. Almost."

But not surprised. Once in a while a rabid dog would wander into Trunswick. A pet might get infected, go savage, and attack anyone who crossed its path. There was only one sad way to take care of such animals.

Had the Wildcat's Claw made things worse for Cordelia? It was a bond token, so who really knew what it was capable of?

Maybe these gifts were more dangerous than they'd even realized.

If he was honest, Conor would prefer to have nothing to do with them. Tembo, the first Greencloak, had hidden the gifts for a reason, and this was it. The tokens were dangerous in the wrong hands.

"This way," said Meilin.

This part of the palace wasn't as grand as the entrance hall. They passed by a small kitchen area, and Conor salivated at the sweet flavors drifting through the partially opened doorway. There was laughter coming from the servants' quarters as they relaxed out of sight from their masters. Conor felt a pang of kinship. When the master was rotten, it was always the servants who suffered most.

They hurried up a flight of stairs, into what were the sleeping quarters. Lamps hung from the ceiling. Most were now extinguished or sizzling softly on low wicks.

Meilin stopped at a corner and put a finger to her lips. Creeping up next to her, Conor peeked around.

Two guards stood before a pair of bronze-clad doors. Strangely, these two weren't in the usual Oathbound garb.

“Those don’t look like Kana’s men,” he whispered. “But they do look like they can handle themselves.”

Meilin nodded. “They *would* be the last of the old guard that she kept around. Father told me the emperor’s bodyguards are the deadliest warriors in the world. They’ve mastered six forms of unarmed combat and all are experts in sword, spear, bow, and halberd.”

Rollan tapped his head. “But nothing up here, right?”

“Wrong. Each has memorized the philosophy of Tang in its entirety—in the original ancient Zhongese. Six volumes, excluding appendices.”

“So they’re good,” said Rollan. “But they’re not Greencloaks.”

“Each has perfect command over his body. They can stand without moving for twelve hours.”

“Shh, one’s coming.” Conor pulled Meilin and Rollan behind a large vase.

One of the two guards rushed past. He looked uncomfortable, and moved in haste.

Conor raised his eyebrow. “Perfect command of everything but his bladder apparently.”

“But there’s still—”

Briggan sprang from his tattoo and bounded down the corridor. His claws clattered on the marble as he leaped at the guard.

There was a sharp cry, a thump, and then it was all over.

They ran down the corridor and there was Briggan, standing over the guard, his bared teeth an inch from the man’s throat. He let out a menacing growl. A very menacing growl.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” suggested Conor. “Briggan’s always hungry when he comes out of passive state. And grouchy when he’s not outdoors.”

“Br—Briggan?” The guard’s eyes widened. “The Great Beast Briggan?”

Conor scratched the wolf’s furry neck. “The one and only.”

Rollan put his palm on the door handle. “You ready?”

The guard spluttered. “You can’t go in there!”

Briggan snarled and licked the man’s neck, brushing his teeth along the bare skin.

The guard shut up.

They needed to be quick before the other one returned. Quietly and slowly, Rollan opened the door to Empress Song’s private quarters.

Even though it was dark, it took Conor only a few moments to realize the room was empty. He went in, Meilin and Rollan right behind him. There were another two rooms leading off this one. Conor looked in one, while Rollan checked the other. Meilin stayed behind to search the antechamber.

Conor entered Song's bedroom. The large bed was empty of linens, the blankets tossed on the floor.

A full-height window led out into the open air. Its curtains billowed in the rising wind. Conor spotted something lying at the threshold: an ornate wooden box with silk padding.

Perfect in size for the Dragon's Eye.

He joined the others and handed the box to Rollan. "We're too late. She's gone off with it."

Meilin wasn't listening. She read through a set of scrolls abandoned on the table. "This is bad. Song's written out all these instructions to her generals. She's planning war."

"Not exactly surprising," said Conor.

Meilin waved to one of the scrolls. "If the other rulers knew about this ..."

Conor glanced at the open window in Song's room.

Was that a trick of the light, or was someone moving through the foliage beyond?

He gestured the others to be silent, then crept back in place, hiding himself to the side of the window.

Was it Song creeping back from wherever she'd gone? A secret spy who guarded the room from the trees?

A shadow stretched across the floor.

It was a girl, that much he could tell.

She stepped in, and Conor grabbed her.

"Hey!"

He blocked the fist the girl threw at his face, then sent her spinning across the room. She crashed against the bed in a tangle of sheets.

Conor leaped forward. "Don't move."

The girl pulled bedding off her and looked up at him. "Is that how you treat your friends?"

Then Abeke got to her feet and laughed.



SONG'S DESCENT

“FATHER! YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM ME!” SONG RAN ALONG the garden path. Where was he?
“Father ...”

What did he want from her?

She'd been asleep, but heard him tapping at the window. The guard had come in and explained it was just the branch against the glass, but Song had *seen* him.

A shadow watched from the other side. As soon as the guard left, he started again, tapping and tapping.

Song had thrown open the window, but he wasn't there.

But was there someone out in the garden? She thought she'd seen a figure moving behind the trees.

Putting the Dragon's Eye in her pocket, Song had climbed over the low balcony and run barefoot after the apparition.

She held up the glowing emerald. “Look! I have it! I have done what you could never do!”

But all she heard was a pitying cry in the rising wind.

“I am greater than you could ever hope to be!” She cried out at the shadows around her. One of them *had* to be the old emperor.

Song winced. Suddenly the Dragon's Eye seemed so heavy. It weighed down her hand. She stared at it; the weird shifting light from within felt as if it was piercing her eyes.

“I will control you,” she told the token. “You will make me ruler.”

The wind had picked up and the trees rocked side to side, adding their groaning to her own voice.

“Song!”

Kana ran through the bushes, with her two Oathbound allies Sid and Cordelia close behind her.

Song trembled. Why were they here?

Had they come to kill her?

That was it! They wanted the Dragon’s Eye for themselves!

“Get away from me!” Song turned and ran.

She had trusted Kana, trusted her to infiltrate the Greencloaks and arrange the murder of her father.

Song stumbled through the bushes. Thorns pulled at her clothes and stabbed into her soles, but she clutched the Eye tightly against her chest. They would *not* get it.

“Song! Wait!”

“Get away from me! You can’t have it!”

They were coming in from either side, Cordelia from the left, Sid from the right. She had nowhere to run.

Kana grabbed her as she reached the cliff’s edge.

“Stop running! You’ll fall!”

Song slowly stopped her struggling. “You don’t want the Eye?”

“No!” Kana said, her eyes worried. “You are the Empress of Zhong. It’s rightly yours.”

Song slumped. “I . . . I don’t know what’s happening to me, Kana.”

It began to rain—soft, tiny drops. Judging by the darkness of the clouds, however, this was a mere prelude. Perhaps a storm was coming.

Kana began leading her gently back to the palace. “We should get you inside, where it’s safe.”

“It’s not safe anywhere, Kana. He’s after me.”

“Who?”

Song bit her lip. Her heart raced as she spoke. “My father.”

“He’s dead,” said Kana plainly. “He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“He’s *out there*,” Song insisted. “Watching me, judging me. He was a cruel man and a useless father. He . . . he had to go. You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” said Kana. “We did what we had to do, Song. But that’s the past now.” Kana tightened her hold on Song’s arm. “Please, let’s go inside.”

“No,” said Song. She felt better now. Stronger. Something in the rain had set her right. “I need to show my father what I can do.”



Song had to tap into the full power of the Dragon’s Eye. Awaken its potential, rather than just experiment with it as she’d done earlier.

Kana and her two companions waited at the foot of the cliffs, while Song stood knee-deep in the waves. The wind threw a cold spray at her, but she ignored it.

The Eye shone brighter now that she was in the sea. It pulsed, and powerful waves of energy traveled through her, firing her blood and bringing an electric tingle to her skin.

Her water dragon was out there, swimming offshore. She watched him ripple through the dark water.

Seaspray was big, but Song knew if she could harness the power of the Eye, she could make the dragon even greater.

She remembered the look of disappointment on her father’s face when she’d summoned Seaspray. She’d been so proud of having a spirit animal. Song could still remember how her heart had swelled with joy, seeing the small lizard swimming through the water toward her, then climbing up this very pebble beach.

The moment they first touched had been ... everything.

She’d turned around, hopeful, expecting to see the same joy in her father. But the moment their eyes had met, she was stunned by his cold gaze.

“It’s small,” her father had said. He frowned. “Call it into passive state.”

“He’s a boy lizard,” Song had called back.

The emperor’s eyes narrowed. “Call. It. To. You.”

Song turned, nodding to her new spirit animal. “Come on, Seaspray. Go into passive form. We’re partners now!”

The tiny water dragon just curled into a ball and fell asleep.

Song remembered the Greencloak who’d administered her Nectar trying to argue on her behalf.

“Bonds take time,” he’d implored, his lovely white crane standing in the sand beside him. “Perhaps the princess could join me in Greenhaven for a while, to foster hers?”

Her father had ordered the guards to escort the Greencloak away.

Song was humiliated. Her father made no attempt to hide his disgust, and that made it even worse. He didn't even stay to chastise her; instead he'd swept away and marched straight back to the palace. His ministers hurried after him.

Neither he, nor half the nobles, bothered attending the evening feast to celebrate her Nectar Ceremony.

Kana had been there, watching from the side, like a dutiful servant. As the room cleared she had dared to approach the table, sitting beside Song and helping her finish the lavish cake.

They'd been closer than sisters from that point on.

"Nothing I ever did was good enough for you, Father." Song gazed out at the sea. "But what did you ever do? Nothing. You were content to just sit on your little throne. No ambition at all. An emperor should have ambition. Otherwise what's the point?"

She took another step deeper into the sea, then another. The waves rocked her, but she'd grown up swimming here. She knew its currents. The only freedom Song could remember was when she'd swam, Seaspray playfully darting from this side to that. The dragon had been her companion, her friend.

And her failure.

She was up to her neck now. The water was cold, but Song didn't feel it. The Eye, now slipped over her neck, pulsed harder. It illuminated the pebbles in the water. A few small fish came close, to investigate the source of this strange green light.

Song took a deep breath and swam.



Down and down she swam, each stroke drawing her deeper under the water into that strange, mute world of shifting light and current.

She could see clearly, and her lungs held the air with little strain.

I could stay down here forever.

The Dragon's Eye gave her these underwater gifts. She understood that it would allow her to be with her water dragon, above and below.

She was alone, and free. Song had forgotten what it felt like to escape the palace and all its people. The servants, the soldiers, and the Oathbound.

How deep was she now? She could hardly see the sky, but did catch glimpses of distant lightning.

The Dragon's Eye glowed upon her chest; Song paused to look around.

What a world.

Coral hills spread out in all directions, tinted in wonderful colors. Red and orange, green and blue. Silver-scaled fish darted past. An immense stingray glided over her, and Song reached up and brushed her fingers against it.

The water surged around her. Scales glistened and a pair of bright yellow eyes shone out of the darkness. With a beat of its wings, the stingray fled.

Her water dragon swam around her, and Song gazed in wonder. He was easily twenty feet long now.

Seaspray drew closer, then floated before her.

You and I will rule the world.

She saw the misshapen spine, the deformed legs, and the crooked tail. The changes had been uneven.

She sensed Seaspray's pain, but there was nothing she could do but continue. Didn't he understand how important this was? He'd always been useless; the Dragon's Eye would make him great, at last.

It'll make him a monster.

It'll make him feared.

An empress should be feared.

Song tugged off the Eye and held it before her. The gem began to brighten....



THE WOLF

GETTING OUT OF THE PALACE WAS HARDER THAN CONOR had expected. The place was in lockdown, now that the prison escape had been discovered.

Conor and Abeke led the way, but they couldn't get past the guards. Instead they used the tree to climb down and ducked into a nearby doorway. The team was back underground, in the armory.

Rollan scowled as he looked around the dingy room. "We might as well just lock ourselves back in the cells, for all the progress we're making."

Conor nodded. "It would be the last place they'd look."

Meilin inspected one of the swords and gave it a casual swing. "We could fight our way out?"

Rollan picked up a short sword and tried to mimic Meilin's skillful strokes. He gave up. "Not sure how far I'd get."

But weapons weren't the only items down here. Conor spotted a pile of gear by the door. It looked familiar ...

He picked up the first item, a cloak. "Hey, this is Tarik's."

Rollan snatched it off him. His eyes widened. "It is! I thought I'd lost it."

The Oathbound had confiscated their gear after they'd been captured. Conor picked up his old ax and set it in his belt. Then his eye caught a familiar shape, leaning against the wall. It was a shepherd's crook, in the Euran style. Conor wondered how such an item had found its way into

Song's armory. It had made quite a journey ... just like Conor himself. He ran his hands over the smooth, old wood.

Abeke checked her bow, adjusting the bowstring and giving it a testing draw. She then collected a quiver of arrows and slung them over her shoulder. "If it's going to be a fight, I'm ready."

Conor pointed over to the corner. "What about him?"

Abeke had gotten all the prisoners away, everyone but the crazy old man. He was by the axes, trying and failing to lift a double-headed monstrosity.

"He's our secret weapon," said Abeke. "The guards will be laughing so hard we'll just walk out."

Meilin strapped on a sword belt and picked out a falchion. It slid soundlessly into its scabbard. "That doesn't solve our biggest problem: the impending war."

"It might not happen," said Conor, but even he knew it was a weak excuse.

Meilin sighed. "We need to get to that boat before the sun comes up. To warn the other nations."

"We *need* to get the bond tokens back," Conor said. "I've just got this feeling that if we leave Song with the Dragon's Eye, something terrible is going to happen."

Rollan frowned. "I've learned by now to trust your feelings," he said. "But how? We're outnumbered, and the Oathbound have all four tokens. As much as I respect Abeke's archery skills, there's no way we'd survive a fight on those terms."

"We could make our own bond tokens," Meilin said softly. She took out the scroll case that Xin Kao Dai had revealed to her.

The group was silent for a long moment.

"We don't even know if it would work," said Rollan.

"So what's new?" said Conor.

"What's new is the danger!" Rollan replied. "Think about what we've learned so far. The bond tokens are created from *our* spirit animal bonds. If those bonds aren't strong enough, they're broken. Forever! And even if we do succeed, a token that's destroyed while its creators are still alive *kills* them both."

"We can't take on Song and the Oathbound as we are," said Conor. "We'll die that way, too."

“But if we get this wrong,” Meilin said in a small voice, “it could tear our bonds apart.” Her hand holding the scroll was trembling. “For us, *and* for our spirit animals. Are you sure we have the right to ask this of them?”

Even this far underground, with yards of rock protecting them in all directions, Conor heard the pounding of the waves beyond.

His friends were right. It was a huge risk. But if they didn't ... ?

“Do you remember my dream about the great wave?” Conor said. “The one that wipes out everything it touches? I think that wave is Song. The Dragon's Eye is dangerous in her hands. If we leave without it, Erdas won't survive. If we fight without the power to match the Oathbound, then Erdas still won't survive.”

Rollan looked uncomfortable. He'd just saved Essix, and now they were talking about putting her in even more danger. But he nodded. “Fine. But I only promise to *ask* her. Essix makes her own decisions.”

Abeke frowned. “Perhaps we can try this ... bonding whatever later, when we're away from here.”

“We can't,” said Conor, wishing it could be otherwise. “It's got to be now or never.”

Conor looked around at the others. No one looked happy with this plan, but one by one they all nodded. They all knew it was the best chance they had of stopping Song. He met Meilin's gaze. “All right. What's the process?”

They gathered around her as she opened the tube and took out the scroll.

The paper was old and delicate. Meilin unrolled it carefully. It cracked under the gentle effort, but held.

“What do you think?” Conor asked.

Meilin's brow furrowed as she concentrated on the minute text. “The ink has faded over the centuries, but I can just about read it. It's a very ancient style.” She glanced to Rollan. “Good thing I had tutors for that.”

Rollan grinned. “Beat me to it.”

“It's more like poetry than straight instruction. There are a lot of weird double meanings. Triple meanings, too.” She pointed to a small pattern. “This could mean ‘a waking dream’ or it could mean ‘buying three eggs.’ ”

Abeke peered over her shoulder. “Please tell me you're joking?”

“Zhongese logograms can have multiple meanings, and the older forms even more so. Plus the symbols have evolved over the years. They may not represent the same things they did, back when this was first written.”

“That does not fill me with hope, Meilin,” said Abeke.

“No one said it would be easy. The scroll is full of warnings of the dangers of getting the process wrong, rather than helping get it right.”

Meilin went pale. “Oh.”

Conor didn’t like the sound of that. “What?”

“It’s ... just a description of what would happen if there was an imbalance between the bonded beings.”

Sailing off to find Worthy suddenly felt like a good idea.

“Well?” asked Rollan.

Meilin grimaced. “It says here that if you don’t open your mind, it will be crushed under the pressure of the process, leaving you a drooling idiot.”

“Oh.”

“And this section explains that if you hesitate at the zenith of the exchange, the incorrect transfer of power will leave you a gibbering idiot.”

Rollan pointed at a row written in faded red ink. “And that?”

“Oh, that’s just describing how your brains will pour out of your nose.”

Rollan gulped loudly.

Meilin finished reading the scroll. “There’s not much to it.” She looked inside the tube, searching for an extra sheet. “Hmm.”

Conor stared at her. “Hmm? Don’t give us *hmm*! Tell us!”

Meilin put her finger in and drew out some mulch. “This *hmm*. Water must have gotten in at some point and destroyed the bottom of the scroll. It’s incomplete.”

Conor groaned. “But can you tell how much?”

“Judging by the small amount of paper, only a few lines. If they’d been more warnings, then it doesn’t matter. But if they’re guidance on how to form the bond, we could be in deep trouble.”

“I call gibbering idiot,” said Rollan. “Drool grosses me out.”

Meilin took a deep breath. “We’ll each need a token. Something representational.”

Conor held out the shepherd’s crook.

“Don’t you want something more ... useful?” asked Meilin. “Like your ax—”

“No. This is me.” Conor tapped it on the stone floor. “It can’t be anything else.”

Rollan swung Tarik’s cloak over his shoulders. “And this is mine.”

Abeke merely plucked her bowstring.

“What about you, Meilin?” Conor asked. “The sword? It suits you.”

Meilin drew it. “It doesn’t feel right,” she said with a sigh. “The tokens should represent both us *and* our animals, and Jhi isn’t a warrior at heart.”

“What, then?”

Meilin looked down at the scroll. Her hair fell over her face and she pulled it aside, automatically turning it around her finger into a rope. Then she looked thoughtful. She picked up a hairpin she’d found in her belongings.

Meilin held it out. “My father gave this to me, on some birthday or another.” She drew her nail over the design. “These are the symbols of knowledge and strength. My father didn’t believe in things like luck or hope. He believed in studying and applying one’s self. Taking what you knew and going out there and using it, to help the nation, the community, your friends.”

Conor smiled. “Sounds like a bond token to me.”

She gripped it and nodded. “Let’s summon our friends.”

Essix shrieked as she broke free of the tattoo. She spread out her gray and golden wings, shifting from one foot to the other and settling down on the top of the open door. Her brilliant, bright eyes reflected the amber light of the torches, as if shining with a fire of their own.

The deep growl from Uraza made the hairs on the back of Conor’s neck stand on end. The leopard sniffed warily, unused to the cramped underground quarters. But she settled as Abeke put her arm over her neck. The cat rested her head on the girl’s lap and purred.

Conor’s own partner, Briggan, yawned as he awoke from Conor’s mark. He ran his red tongue over his black lips, then went to the table and snatched the jailer’s leg of beef. He sat down beside Conor and started gnawing. “Your turn, Meilin.”

“I ... I don’t know. This might be a mistake. For me.”

“Why?”

“The scroll assumed the process of creating a bond token would be carried out with true spirit animals. I used ... Bile, remember? Will Jhi trust me fully?”

Conor took Meilin’s hand. He felt it shaking and he steadied it. “That was then, Meilin. Call Jhi.”

Meilin closed her eyes. A moment later, she juddered and when she looked again, there stood Jhi. The panda’s fur rippled as it ambled beside her.

Jhi pushed her cheek against Meilin’s, and Meilin pushed her fingers through the thick fur, obviously thankful for the bear’s gentle strength.

“Jhi, I need your help,” Meilin said. She glanced around to the other Four Fallen. “We all do. If we’re going to defeat Song and her Oathbound, then we have to be a match for them.”

“We need bond tokens,” Abeke said, running her hands through Uraza’s fur. “Just like the ancient heroes. But the process ...”

“You *know* how dangerous the process is,” Rollan muttered. He glanced up at Essix on the doorframe. “Because you’ve done it already. Your talismans were tokens, weren’t they? Different, but the same. Gransfen told us.”

“What we’re asking you is to trust us with something just as precious,” Conor said. He pulled his hand from Briggan’s coat, suddenly hesitant to touch him. “Something just as dangerous.”

The Four Fallen glanced between each other. Briggan, Uraza, Jhi, and Essix. It was a strange sort of communion—wordless—but Conor had little doubt that they *were* communicating somehow. Even as spirit animals, the Great Beasts were still connected.

Then Briggan licked his face. The wolf hopped eagerly to his feet, panting. Essix shrieked from the door, and Uraza purred beside Abeke. Jhi glanced toward Meilin, her silver eyes resolute.

“Looks like we’re ready,” said Meilin.

Conor tightened his grip around the shepherd’s crook. The wood was smooth and dark; someone had carried it for a long, long time.

Who? Had it been a boy like him, once upon a time? Tending sheep day in, day out. Looking after them as the seasons came and went. Had the boy grown up, become a man, an elder? Had he taken this crook out before dawn, as one year melded into the next?

That might have been Conor’s life, too, if it hadn’t been for Briggan.

All those days with nothing more to worry about than counting the sheep out in the morning, and counting the same number back in the evening.

For better or for worse, he wasn't going to have that sort of life.

It still held an appeal. The simplicity of it. But if he'd gone down that path, then Conor would have never met Abeke, Rollan, and Meilin. His life would have been limited to a few fields, a patch of grass on a slope. The same view for every day of his life.

His life before Briggan seemed to belong to another Conor.

He remembered the morning of the Nectar Ceremony, all that time ago, when he'd been the servant of Devin, the young noble of Trunswick. It seemed ridiculous now that his ambition had been to have a sheepdog as a spirit animal.

What if he *had* summoned one? Big and fluffy, with a calm temperament and a quick mind.

How would his life have turned out?

Well, certainly not hiding in the Summer Palace of the Empress of Zhong, that's for sure.

Now he was attempting something far deeper than just a spirit animal bond.

Briggan growled, a few feet from him. Conor gazed into those blue eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

Meilin read down the scroll. "It says to close your eyes and see the animal in your mind and heart."

"How do you do that?"

"Sorry. It doesn't really explain. There's something about *being* the animal. Whatever that means."

Conor scowled. "Should I run around on all fours and bark a bit?"

Rollan laughed. "No harm in trying."

Conor sat back on his heels and closed his eyes. He concentrated on their bond.

He smelled Briggan's damp fur. The wolf's pelt had a unique odor. It changed with the seasons and the location. Here on the coast, Briggan absorbed the wild sea and the salty air, catching particles within his long hairs.

Conor's skin prickled. His own hair stood on end. He felt the breeze upon him, ever so slightly to begin with, but growing as his sensitivity

increased. Minute currents slipped through his fingers, cold shifts that rippled over his bare face.

Was this what it was like, being a wolf?

His breath deepened and slowed. Conor saw Briggan in the center of his mind.

The large wolf stood in long grass. The trees were thick all around, and the sunlight formed a dappled pattern across his gray shoulders as it fell through the lattice of leaves. Birds called from the branches, and there was the distant laughter of water running over rocks.

It was warm here in this forest. Not the true warmth of summer, but the temptation of it. It was a springtime warmth, so he felt the sun, but also the cold dark, as if the shadows had trapped the last of the winter's chill.

Deeper he breathed. The forest became more than a feeling, a figment of his imagination.

It became ...

He became ...

He sniffs the grass, seeking out a scent of something to chase. Something to hunt. Something to eat.

His stomach is tight, but he has learned to live with hunger. How long since his last meal, that rabbit he snatched in his jaws as it fled to its hole?

He doesn't count the passing of time the same way as his human partner does.

Paws dig at the soft earth, moist from the morning dew. He pauses to lick water from the tip of a low leaf.

The brambles brush against him as he glides through.

His ears twitch as he hears movement. A hoof catches lightly on a rock and there is the fearful breath of a creature that smells him, just as he smells it.

A heart trembles, not far away.

He lowers himself into the grass and waits.

His thigh muscles quiver in anticipation. He forces himself to be still, not easy when the scent of prey floods his nostrils.

His fur ripples with the change in the wind. His prey approaches, ignorant and unaware.

He has fangs. He has claws and speed and the muscles of a true predator. There is nothing extra in him that might cause him to falter,

unlike sweet Conor.

The boy doubts. The boy worries. The boy looks to his friends and looks back at himself, unsure of what he is.

A wolf has no doubts about what he is.

He is wildness incarnate, though he walks in the steps of his human partner. He was born when the world was new, before the beasts understood that there were those that hunted and those that fled. He taught them such things. He may not have been as powerful as the lion or as stealthy as the leopard. He did not have the grace of the eagle or the swiftness of the falcon, yet there was not a beast in all Erdas who more possessed the spirit of the hunter as he.

His human partner doubted, but he did not. He knew what he was.

Briggan.

The deer stepped into view.

Conor snapped his eyes open. "Oh ... wow."

The others stared at him. "What happened?" Abeke asked.

What indeed? Conor held out his hands, half expecting to see claws. He touched his face. A normal nose, rather than a snout. His teeth were as before, not long fangs. He didn't appear to have grown a tail.

He was human, still.

But his heart pumped with such strength he could barely hold it in. His muscles burned with feverish desire. And his head swam with a spinning kaleidoscope of scents.

He'd never understood what pure joy could really be until he'd stepped in Briggan's skin. The wolf had pounced and taken the deer with a single bite. Conor licked his lips, still savoring the sweetness of the perfect kill.

Briggan's emotions, his desires, his needs, were simple and unencumbered. He knew what he needed, and that was that. He was a wolf.

Conor felt himself rise.

Things fell away from him. His worries about the past, mistakes he'd made, things he wished he'd done or said better.

Briggan didn't worry about these things.

And what did tomorrow mean? There would always be another tomorrow. Briggan did not care for tomorrow. A wolf had today and savored every second of it.

Conor held the crook tightly, still feeling the electric thrill of what he'd tasted.

His gaze fell on Rollan. Conor grinned. "Your turn."



ESSIX SETTLED ON ROLLAN'S SHOULDER. HER TALONS dug in through the material, squeezing, but not quite piercing, the flesh beneath.

He brushed down the feathers covering her chest. Essix churred in approval.

It seemed to him that they'd been together forever. He could hardly remember his life before she'd entered it.

And what an inauspicious entrance! Deep in a cell in Concorba. He'd been caught trying to rob an apothecary of willow extract for a sick friend. Digger, that had been the boy's name. Another street urchin, just like Rollan.

So much that followed had been wild, exciting, bewildering. He'd grown up in a semi-derelict orphanage until he'd run off at nine, tired of the foul food and endless, backbreaking work.

Then it had been the dark alleyways and crowded streets of Concorba. Rifling through the bins at the end of the day for leftovers. Sleeping in doorways or in hastily erected shelters that dripped during the wet days and overheated on the sunny ones. Their homes would last only as long as it took the militia to find and tear them down.

Those streets had been his whole world. Now the whole world was his whole world.

Essix sensed his mood and spread out her wings. She shook them, as if ready for flight.

"One day, Essix," he promised. "We'll travel the world together *without* a crisis. We'll go everywhere."

“Rollan?”

He turned his attention to Meilin. The girl gestured to a spot on the floor beside her. “Maybe if you sit down?”

He did. Essix hopped off and, with a merest flick of her wingtips, rose to perch on an armrest facing Rollan.

He settled down and looked into Essix’s eyes as deeply as he could. He matched his breathing to the rise and fall of the bird’s chest. It felt awkward at first, but the pattern established itself, so he knew they would stay in time as he closed his eyes.

With his lids shut Rollan expanded his other senses.

He felt the air move around him.

Even here underground there were currents.

They ruffled Rollan’s hair. They caressed his cheeks, the bare skin of his arms. They were subtle, slight, yet grew stronger every passing second. How was that possible?

Rollan’s heartbeat quickened, half in fear, half in excitement.

He could no longer feel the floor underneath him. The air surrounded him, drifting, rushing, and roaring all around.

Rollan panicked. He was losing control. Suddenly he was tumbling.

But he was in an underground cell!

No! He was high in the sky!

The wind rushed past him, and he knew if he didn’t do something he would be crushed when he hit the ground.

But what could he do? He didn’t have wings!

Over and over, Rollan fell. He cried out, but those cries were ripped away by the wind.

Then his cry transformed. He called out, but it was with the shriek of the falcon.

Joyous, free, wind riding.

He stopped spinning. He flattened his body against the rushing air and instead of fighting it, became a part of it. He spread out his wings so the cold air rushed through his feathers.

He turned and swooped. The air to one side became more intense, more resistant, as he pushed in that direction. With a flick of his feathers, he turned the other way. He skimmed across the treetops, his shadow a blur across the undulating ground.

Rollan rose up. Up and up he went, the sun warming his wings, blessing him with its glow as he passed above the clouds and—

Erda. He gazed down upon it. The seas glistening in the daylight. Green expanses spread out before him, dappled in the tawny shades that marked Amaya. Farther west—for the falcon's sight seemed to have no limits—the horizon bent away into dusky darkness. Rollan could see the outline of faraway Stetriol and the long shadows of the Hundred Isles, all asleep.

What a world it was. Rollan's heart filled almost to bursting. What visions came from being up high. There were no boundaries. He spread out his feathers, as if he might touch one end of the world and the other. He might even cup it in his palms.

But the clouds darkened. They stirred with malevolent anger. They rumbled, angry voices that protested his presence. They crackled with lightning.

Rollan knew he needed to leave, fast.

And there are few things faster than a falcon. He dove through the rain-swollen clouds, breaking free of their cold embrace to soar above the sea, above the land and above the Summer Palace. He spun between its tall towers and then ...

Opened his eyes.

Essix sat opposite, still on her perch, but her gaze intense upon his. She fluttered her wings, the way she did after a long flight.

Rollan drew a long, deep breath. His heart calmed, and he noticed the sweat dripping from his nose. His skin burned, yet he could still feel the rain and cold winds.

Meilin arched an eyebrow. "Well?"

Rollan wiped his forehead. "That. Was. Amazing."

"How? Tell us."

He looked at his arms, half expecting them to be covered in feathers. "I flew. Really flew. Not like a dream or a wish, but like a bird flies. Riding the wind, seeing the world from up high." He laughed. "I still feel as if I could take off at any moment."

Conor grinned. "Best stay away from rooftops for a while."

He joked, but Rollan felt a kernel of truth in it. The temptation to soar was almost overwhelming. He felt trapped, cooped up in here. He wanted to get out and ... well.

Essix cried softly, and Rollan ran his palm gently over her feathers. How could Essix, having such freedom, bear to be in a place like this?

How did she *ever* come down? The idea of Song putting her in a cage made his blood run cold.

He, too, had tasted freedom. Once when he'd run from the orphanage. Then when he'd been released from jail to the Greencloaks. Each time had felt like walking through a door into a bigger, wider world. But nothing like this.

Nothing like this at all.



THE PANDA

“**T**WO DOWN, TWO TO GO,” SAID ABEKE. “YOUR TURN, Meilin.”
Meilin hesitated, then shook her head. “You’d better go next.”

“What’s wrong?”

“What do you think?” she snapped. “The creation of the bond token takes total trust, total openness between the human and the spirit animal. I don’t have that. I forced my will on Jhi.”

“Meilin, you and Jhi have come so far since then.”

Meilin stared at her friend. “That doesn’t change the fact that the Bile formed my bond. We don’t know how that will influence the process. If I try and create a bond token, at best it could merely fail. At worst ...” She put her hand on Jhi’s soft fur. “It could destroy us both.”

Conor sat down beside her. “We can’t beat Song and the Oathbound without you, Meilin. It’s that simple.”

“I’ll help, but without the bond token.”

“You’re scared?” he asked.

“Of course I am!” Meilin looked at them. They were trying to help, but they couldn’t do the ritual for her. Dread weighed her down like a black rock in her chest.

Jhi snuggled up to her, nuzzling her nose into Meilin’s chest. But instead of making Meilin feel better, it made her feel worse. Meilin had no right to bring any harm to the panda.

She gazed into those silver eyes and saw herself reflected.

Did she really look so terrified?

She turned away. “I’ll help you, Abeke, but I can’t—I *won’t*—go through with this.”

“We managed okay,” said Conor. “There’s no reason to be afraid. I’m sure—”

“You all bonded through Nectar. My relationship with Jhi was poisonous since the very beginning.”

“We need you, Meilin.” Rollan took her hand, and Meilin felt her cheeks flushing.

Stupid cheeks, she thought.

“You and Jhi came this far together. You’ve ridden all those waves and storms. Without the two of you, Song and the Oathbound will win. They’ll spread misery to every corner of Erdas. Stopping them isn’t down to just you, me, Conor, or Abeke. It’s not down to the Four Fallen. It’s all of us *together*. Always has been, always will be.”

They watched her, even the crazy old man, sitting silently with his chin resting on a bony fist. Meilin dearly wished for the ground to rise up and swallow her in that moment. But Jhi sat beside her—unworried, peaceful. That was the panda’s strength. She didn’t have the leopard’s fury or the falcon’s speed, but her quietness mattered. Jhi was a rock in the stormy sea. Meilin had to anchor herself to her patient power.

“All right,” she said eventually. “I’ll do it.”

Meilin read through the scroll again, swiftly but intently. Then she knelt in front of the panda, who sat facing her with her legs splayed out.

Meilin took the hairpin in her left hand and reached out with her right.

Jhi twitched her nose. She reached out with her left paw.

They touched.

Jhi’s pad was warm and leathery. And bigger than Meilin had expected. Jhi was big, something easily forgotten or ignored. Their eyes met, and this time Meilin didn’t look away from her reflection. She focused on it. She saw her brow smooth out and her lips relax. She felt Jhi’s heartbeat mimic her own ever-so-slight trembles that passed through their palms.

Meilin took a deep breath, as the scroll had instructed.

Her eyelids drooped.

She felt her head lower, until her chin rested on her chest.

Still, they kept contact through their palms.

Something tickled her throat. Meilin coughed. The chamber was dusty.

But the cough didn't clear it. Something slick and foul coated the back of her throat. She coughed again, more forcefully.

Her heartbeat quickened.

Liquid filled her mouth, and she gagged under the oily stench of it. She tried to spit it out, but as she opened her mouth, more poured in.

Opening her eyes, she could see only black liquid pouring down over her face.

Bile!

She tried to twist away, but some invisible power locked her motionless, head tilted back and jaw wide open.

Animals screamed all around her, though she couldn't see them. The Bile covered her face. It ran down her throat, up her nostrils, over her eyes, and into her ears.

No! Let me breathe!

Their cries were horrific. Birds screamed and beasts howled. They cried and roared in agony as they were tortured by the Bile.

Her mind reeled at the torments, not just her drowning, but the suffering all around her. The true, evil nature of the Bile was exposed to her, and she couldn't bear it, thinking that she had subjected Jhi to even a fraction of this pain.

Meilin realized it then. In this moment she was Jhi.

Meilin had used her spirit animal. She'd looked down on the noble panda, dismissed her, and held her in contempt. Jhi hadn't been her ally or friend, she was a servant, or even worse, a slave.

Song was right. She and I are the same.

There was no hiding it. She'd opened herself to the truth, and it was too terrible to take.

The cries grew louder, but then Meilin realized they were not beasts in torment, but her friends, calling her!

She clenched her teeth together. They needed her.

Jhi needed her.

Suddenly, Meilin could feel the panda's calming spirit as her own. She sensed her resolve. Orbs of light began to glow around Meilin, constellations that shone against the darkness. Wherever they appeared, the Bile receded. Though her breath was all spent, Meilin forced her chest under control.

Everything would be all right. For perhaps the first time in her life, Meilin believed it.

“Meilin!”

She opened her eyes.

She breathed. No air had tasted sweeter.

Jhi lay her head on her shoulder and hugged Meilin. The panda’s fur smelled of salt and warm damp, but Meilin buried her face into it. She hugged the big bear with all her might, letting the fur absorb her tears.

Then, one after the other, her friends joined them. First Abeke, then Conor, and finally Rollan. They united in the hug until Meilin was surrounded by the best things in her life.



“Are you all right?” asked Abeke.

Meilin drank some more water. The taste of the Bile was still stuck to her throat, but she nodded. “Thanks to you.”

Uraza sat on the table, peering down at the two girls. Jhi was curled up in the corner, not quite asleep. Meilin saw the glint of the beast’s silvery eyes, keeping watch on her.

Essix fidgeted. She wanted to be out and soaring. The falcon had already ripped the wooden armrest of the chair she was perched on. Briggan sniffed the corners of the room, searching for more food.

“Do you feel any different?” asked Abeke.

“Honestly? No. Just ... relieved.” She looked at the hairpin still clenched in her hand. It hadn’t changed. There was no surge of power radiating from it, and it wasn’t glowing. She slipped it back through her hair. “Well?”

Abeke laughed. “It suits you. But then, everything does.”

“Do you two still want to go through with this?” asked Meilin.

Abeke took Uraza’s furry cheeks in her hands and gave the leopard a good shake. The beast growled, revealing fangs capable of killing an antelope—and a Niloan girl—with a single bite. Instead, the leopard licked her.

Meilin smirked. “I guess that’s a yes.”

Abeke rested her arm across the big cat’s shoulders. “She’s a pussycat really.”

Meilin shook her head, amazed at how casually Abeke treated her spirit animal. Not many would dare refer to one of the Great Beasts as a pussycat.

Uraza cast a sidelong glance at Abeke and slowly revealed her claws, a subtle reminder of what she was capable of. Abeke saw it and scoffed. “What are you planning to do? Peel me an apple?”

Uraza’s whiskers twitched with mock annoyance, then she folded her paws under her chin and settled down.

Abeke held up her bow, tapping it gently on the leopard’s head. The beast closed her eyes, trying hard to ignore her.

Meilin finished the jug of water. The sticky coating was gone from her throat. All trace of the Bile washed away.

The boys gathered around. Their spirit animals stopped their activities and also turned to watch.

Abeke sat down cross-legged and gave a short whistle.

Uraza jumped off the table to land with the barest sound. She padded around in a circle before settling down opposite her bonded human.

Meilin met Abeke’s gaze. “Ready?”

Abeke winked. “Ready.”



THE LEOPARD

I'M NOT READY.
I Abeke had seen the others go through the rituals. How easily they'd mastered their doubts! She'd tried to appear strong, at ease, but as she looked at Uraza, worry gripped her chest.

Have we truly forgiven each other?

The image of Zerif sprang unbidden to her mind. He'd taken control of Uraza and made the big leopard attack her.

Abeke would have died if it hadn't been for Shane.

No, she had to put such thoughts out of her head.

That was then. She and Uraza had renewed their bond, and it was stronger than ever.

Meilin watched her. "Are you all right, Abeke?"

"Yes!" she said cheerfully, but it came out sharper than she wanted. "Just ... just let's not waste any more time." Meilin watched her skeptically.

Abeke still couldn't get Shane out of her mind.

He'd been the first friend she'd made after Uraza appeared in her village. They'd spent all those days training together onboard the Conquerors' ship. She'd trusted him.

She sees the fear in his eyes as she attacks.

He fights, but what chance has he got against her claws and fangs?

The blood shines ...

Abeke cried out. That wasn't her! She didn't kill Shane! He was her friend! He was trying to redeem himself!

Abeke gasped as the memories poured uncontrollably through her. She and Uzara merged.

Shane, poor Shane.

Uraza's savagery overwhelmed her. She saw Shane, lying under her paws, teeth gritted together as he struggled to hold on. But there was that dullness in his eyes, the paleness of his skin as his life faded. He beat against her with his fists. It was pitiful that he thought he could defend himself against the leopard, a born predator. What claws did he have? None. Even after absorbing his spirit animal, he was a soft human boy.

He did not lack courage in those last moments. He did it for Abeke, to save her, and that was hardest to bear.

"I'm sorry, Shane."

She tried to resist the bloodlust, but it was too great. Abeke watched helplessly as she finished Shane off. Her sharp ears heard his heartbeat weaken, then stop. His last breath fell against her bloody fur.

Uraza was a killer.

That was the spirit animal Abeke had bonded with.

How could she have been so naive?

And what sort of person did that make her?

Abeke wanted to scream, to throw off her bloody skin, but her cry transformed into a victorious roar. This was what Uraza did. She celebrated in the kill. Such brutal things were her passion.

Abeke licked her lips; the raw, warm smell made her head spin.

No, no, no ...

Was there anything better than this? The power she held, the beauty of her? The muscles and sinews under the fur were sculpted for this one deed, and this one deed alone. Why shouldn't she celebrate it?

Why else have these claws, or possess sharp fangs, if not to tear and rip asunder?

Anything else was a betrayal of her nature.

Shane lay there, the ground darkening with his blood.

And in that moment, Abeke watched herself mourn him.

She saw herself reach out to put her palm against his cheek.

Uraza felt Abeke's sorrow. Abeke knew it as surely as she knew herself. Her violet eyes softened. As Uraza, she licked Shane's hand, trying to stir it to move.

Her body quivered with guilt. Uraza understood more than Abeke had realized. The regret her leopard had been carrying this whole time! The deep, deep shame.

A mighty heart beat within the cage of her ribs, but Uraza was both fierce and soft. Her fur hid the muscles beneath, but there was beauty, too. Uraza was many things. Hunter, killer, courageous, beautiful, and hers.

Zerif had tried to break that bond. Shane had died to protect it.

She knew it and Uraza knew it, too. They'd gone through so much together. It was inevitable that they would have losses as well as victories. The world revolved around seasons of drought and seasons of plenty.

That's what made the rain so precious.

Abeke lifted her head and gazed at the leopard's spots, no one alike. All were unique to her spirit animal. She could gaze at Uraza's patterns forever.

Uraza licked her face and purred.

Abeke laughed as the big cat rested her forepaws upon her shoulders. She nuzzled her nose into Abeke's ear, her whiskers tickling her cheeks.

Shane had died to save their bond. His passing would weigh heavily in her heart forever, but the best way to remember him, to honor him, would be to become closer to Uraza, not more distant.

Uraza sat her head on Abeke's lap. Abeke drew her fingers along the leopard's fur, making her ears twitch.

She felt complete. She and Uraza were one whole, and greater because of it. Abeke tightened her hold on the bow, their bond token, and sighed deeply.

Meilin put her hand on her shoulder; her brows were wrinkled with worry.

"I'm fine," said Abeke, wiping the last of her tears away. "We're fine."

In the back of the room, the crazy old man coughed. "You kids are weird!" he declared cheerfully.



Conor shook Briggan's hairy head. "So, how many times have we saved Erdas?"

Rollan smirked as Essix cried out. “Essix thinks this’ll be her fourth, but they had a head start.”

Meilin was already halfway up the steps. Jhi bounded up behind her somewhat awkwardly. “Let’s not tempt fate. Erdas isn’t saved yet.”

Uraza growled, and Abeke laughed. “Glad you’re so confident.”

The steps went around and around. Essix had to grip onto Rollan’s shoulders; she couldn’t fly in such confines.

Conor raised his hand as they reached the top door. “Shh.”

He leaned against the thick wood and listened. “Four of them. And ... a couple of roast chickens.” He licked his lips. “And a plate of lamb chops. Those are mine.”

Briggan snorted.

“All right. Ours.”

Abeke spoke from the back. “You can tell all that from a sniff?”

Eyes closed, Conor breathed in deeper. “No. I can tell that the cheese is stale, there’s a jug of ale, and that two of the guards haven’t washed in the last week. One’s got a toothache.”

“You can smell a toothache?”

“Upper molar on the left. Rotted all the way through.”

Conor took a step back, his eyes flashing with excitement. “Time to make an entrance.”

He kicked the door open.

Conor’s nose had been right. There were four Oathbound in the guardroom. Two sat around a small table, each caught mid-snack on a piece of roast chicken. The third held a pair of pliers in the wide-open mouth of a fourth, leaning far back on a stool.

Startled by the sudden attack, the soldier with the pliers pulled hard, and the other man screamed as a bloody tooth came out and he fell backward.

Conor grinned. “Is now a bad time?”

They fumbled for their weapons, but it was all too late.

Uraza catapulted across the room, slamming her forepaws onto one of the Oathbound’s chest. He tumbled, his armor clanging loudly like cymbals. He stopped only when he hit the wall, and Uraza stood inches from him, letting him have a good look at her teeth.

Essix shrieked and circled over them, darting in to tear at the face of another guard. He waved his halberd around, too wildly in a room so small and crowded. He knocked his fellow Oathbound across the head

and down he went, tossing up the chicken. In came Briggan. The big wolf barked once, then settled his paws on the man's chest.

Jhi did more than that. She lumbered over to the man missing his tooth and sat down on him. At least she licked his face. The guard's look of pain softened a bit.

The last guard merely raised his hand.

Meilin pointed at him. "Drop the chicken."

He did.

Abeke looked around the room. How long had that taken? Mere seconds. She joined Uraza and the terrified guard. "I'm going to ask you a few questions. You're going to answer them truthfully, aren't you?"

He nodded. Which wasn't easy, as he was still upside down.

"Where is Song?"

The man stared at Uraza. "Sh-she's gone back down to the beach with some others. I think."

Uraza growled.

"Please, that's all I know! It's the truth!"

"How many other Oathbound are with them?"

"Just the empress and her inner circle."

Abeke frowned. With the stakes being so high, it would be a bloody battle, but at least it wasn't an army.

The room had plenty of manacles, so Meilin chained the guards. Abeke took the keys and threw them out the small grille.

She turned to the crazy old man, who'd been following their every step. "Keep close. When we tell you to run, run."

He slapped his thighs. "Run like a gazelle!"

"Or just as fast as you can."

They made their way to the outside courtyard.

The sky was unnaturally dark. Morning was still a few hours ahead, but black clouds blocked what moonlight there was. Lightning flashed angrily across the horizon.

Horses neighed in their stables, but otherwise the courtyard was empty. The bad weather had driven everyone to shelter.

Everyone, that is, apart from the soldiers at the gate.

These men weren't Oathbound, but they weren't lounging like the guards earlier. They were in full armor and had their weapons in hand.

Two carried crossbows. They stood safe upon the top platform. Essix could get to them, but Abeke wouldn't want to risk the bird being shot

like that.

“We’ll have to charge them,” suggested Rollan.

Meilin shook her head. “We’ll get skewered on their spears. We’re stuck.”

“No, no, you’re not.”

Abeke and the others turned. The old man stepped forward.

He narrowed his eyes. “Leave them to me.”

The crazy old man started across the courtyard, shouting as he went.

Abeke sprinted after him. “Get back here!”

The soldiers turned to face them. One of them wore the golden helmet of a Zhongese captain. “You! Halt!”

Abeke tensed as Uraza growled at her side. Looks as if they were fighting after all.

The old man gazed at the lead soldier. “Captain Chang, isn’t it?”

“Do I know you?”

“Have I changed so much?” said the old man.

Then something strange happened. The old man pulled back his sleeve and a crane burst forth. The great white bird spread its wings, rising to perch on the roof of the gatehouse.

The captain turned from the bird to the old man. “Ambassador Ying?”

The old man scratched his beard. “The same.”

Abeke glanced over to Meilin, who shrugged. What was going on?

The old man beckoned the soldiers. “Tell your men to stand down and let these youngsters pass. They’re here to stop Song.”

“The empress? She gave strict instructions—”

“The empress murdered her own father for the crown,” declared the ambassador. “Let these children pass.”

He spoke with an authority that belied his frail, thin frame. Even the smallest of the soldiers was twice his size, but they all faltered.

Ambassador Ying frowned. “I am not used to repeating myself.”

The captain drew his sword and Abeke nocked an arrow. Uraza tensed, settling back on her haunches so she could catapult herself forward.

The sword clanged on the stony ground. The captain turned to his men. “Drop your weapons and open the gate!”

All around them, spears and halberds dropped; the men set to work on the massive winch that controlled the main gate.

A cold wind blew in off the cliffs. The sound of the crashing waves grew louder.

Ambassador Ying bowed to Abeke and the others. "I'm sorry for the subterfuge, but I needed to be sure."

"Sure of what?" asked Conor.

"That you were worthy of Olvan's trust," said the old man. "I am, or was, the Greencloak ambassador to Zhong's royal court. It was I who oversaw Song's Nectar Ceremony. I saw the delight in the young girl's eyes when her water dragon emerged from the sea, and saw that delight turn bitter, thanks to her father's contempt. I tried to reason with him, only to be exiled." He grimaced at the sad memory. "After his death I hoped to help Song and heal some of the pain she'd suffered over the years; instead I learned she had been behind the emperor's death and the framing of the Greencloaks. But I was imprisoned before I could bring proof to the other lords of Zhong."

Abeke spoke. "Why didn't you trust us earlier?"

Then man sighed. "Child, my empress—a girl who I'd watched grow up—murdered her own father. And yet ... I understood why. The emperor was a tyrant, all the more so to his daughter. If you'd seen what he put her through ..." Ying shook his head. "Even as she had me arrested, I pitied her. But Song's ambitions will destroy us all. Seeing you all truly bond with your spirit animals, I realized the truth. Those relics are too dangerous in her hands. You must get them back."

Abeke frowned. "This conversation is not over, Ambassador."

"But it can wait," he replied. "You have to stop her."

With a heavy clang, the gates locked into position, fully raised.

Briggan howled, and Uraza padded forward. The big leopard looked back at Abeke expectantly.

Abeke tightened her hold on her bow. Was it truly a bond token? How would she know? "I'm coming," she said.



RAIN LASHED DOWN ONTO THEM AS THEY CREPT OUT OF the palace. Abeke shivered under the cold, stinging pellets. Uraza shook herself all the way down to a flick of her tail, throwing off the raindrops. She padded up ahead, growling softly.

The skies heaved with black clouds. Back home this would be cause for celebration; who knew better than her, the Rain Dancer?

Yet these clouds were angry, and they made it known through thunderous clashes and vicious shards of the lightning. Great sheets of light lit the mountainous clouds.

“Song will be down by the beach,” said Meilin. “We need to—”

“Children, shouldn’t you be indoors? And locked up?”

Sid the Generous stood in the middle of the path leading to the cliffs. He wore Stormspeaker and a new suit of brass armor. There were golden rings on his fingers, and his belt was made of silver and golden plates.

“We’ll make this easy for you, Sid,” said Conor. “We’ll count to ten. Just run.”

Sid drew his sword. It was bright, and very sharp. “You expect *me* to run? Did you not notice *this*?” He tapped the crown.

“We don’t have time for this,” said Meilin. Her gaze was on the heaving waves beyond. The sea boiled. The choppy water was blacker than the clouds.

“We can’t have him calling for reinforcements,” said Rollan. “We need to deal with him.”

Abeke agreed. “No time like the present.”

Conor pointed to the east. "There's another path down to the beach."

"I'll deal with Sid," said Rollan. "Go."

"After me," said Abeke. She nocked an arrow. "A simple leg wound should do the trick."

At this range, less than a dozen yards, she couldn't miss. Sid didn't move. Maybe he thought he could dodge aside at the last second? But no one was that quick.

Abeke loosed the arrow.

A flash of lightning dazzled her for a moment. When Abeke glanced back, she found Sid was unharmed. "Want to try again?" he said.

Meilin put her hand on Abeke's shoulder. "We'll meet you down by the beach." She nodded to Conor, and off they ran, leaving Rollan and Abeke to deal with Sid the Generous.

Abeke nocked another arrow, creeping closer. Sid waved his sword between them, beckoning her to try again. His crown shimmered. Minute sparks jumped across its spikes.

The air around her crackled. Her hair stood on end....

"Abeke!"

Rollan knocked her over as the air exploded and a lightning bolt struck the ground. The flash blinded her and her head rang from the noise of the strike. Rollan cried out and rolled aside as Sid swiped down with his sword. Sparks jumped from the blade's edge, leaping across a rock.

Sid laughed as the two of them scrambled back to their feet. "That's why it's called Stormspeaker. You never did get much of a chance to use it, did you?"

The air around Sid buzzed. Blue electric bolts jumped along his sword blade, and his skin crackled with energy.

Abeke shot two arrows, barely aiming, but each flew true.

Two whips of lightning erupted from the crown, incinerating the first and slicing the other in half. "That the best you can do?"

Then he attacked.

One moment he was twenty yards away and then he was there, right before her. Uraza roared a warning. Abeke ducked as Sid cut. He stabbed at Rollan, who only barely managed to pull back. Sid laughed as he slashed again, tearing a hole in Rollan's shirt.

Rollan glared. Tarik's cloak billowed behind him, almost like a pair of great wings.

Uraza leaped in to attack. She slammed Sid squarely in the stomach, and the two of them fell. But Sid sprang to his feet with astonishing—lightning—speed. Even Uraza was hard pressed to dodge his blows. The leopard suffered a deep cut along her ribs before retreating.

Puffing for breath, Sid drew back his sleeve and a moment later his wolverine flashed into existence. The beast's fur stood on end as it snarled at them. Sid smiled. "Slasher's been bored sitting on my arm. He wants some blood. He wonders what the blood of the Four Fallen tastes like?"

The bleeding leopard and the wolverine circled one another, snapping their teeth. The wolverine lacked Uraza's speed, but more than made up for it with bulk and wickedly sharp claws. Abeke wanted to shoot him, but didn't dare shift her attention from Sid. They locked eyes, and she knew he was waiting for her to drop her guard, even for a fraction of a second.

Slasher leaped forward, but Uraza sprang aside, her tail twitching away at the last instant. The wolverine snapped his jaws, but Uraza twisted with feline grace, raking her claws along the wolverine's flanks.

The big beast whimpered.

Uraza growled, and Slasher backed away, spitting with rage, and a little fear.

He snapped his big jaws, but Uraza fell silent, and her haunches twitched. Abeke knew the move all too well.

Slasher looked at Sid.

"Go on, finish her!" he yelled at him.

Uraza sprang forward, faster than a blink. She spun in midair, an impossible move for anything but a cat, and clamped her teeth on the back of the wolverine's neck. She bit down and tore off a thick clump of fur.

Slasher screamed and rolled over, kicking and clawing as Uraza snapped at him. She cuffed him across the jaw, and that was enough.

The big wolverine fled.

"Come back here! Come back!" Sid cried out after his spirit animal.

Abeke raised an eyebrow. "You should have spent more time working on your bond, Sid."

Uraza growled, her violet eyes on the Oathbound.

Essix shrieked as she circled above them. Sid bellowed, then thrust his sword skyward. A bolt of lightning tore free from the clouds. Essix

wheeled away as sparks smoked her wingtips.

“Leave her alone!” screamed Rollan. He jumped at Sid and—

Abeke gasped. Rollan blurred between them and struck Sid with both fists. Sid tumbled head over heels, but Rollan ...

Rollan flew. His cloak billowed behind him in the storm winds, carrying him upward ten feet, twenty, fifty. Even from here, Abeke saw the boy’s eyes shine with fury. He curled up, bringing his knees to his chest, then dove.

Sid scrambled to his feet, stunned and bewildered. Only at the last second did he see Rollan. He cried out, releasing a blistering wall of lightning bolts.

Rollan spun between them, too fast to be hit.

Slam!

Rollan turned at the last moment and rammed both feet into Sid’s chest. He skimmed over the ground, barely slowing, before winging back into the air.

“How ... how ...?” Sid gasped, clutching his chest. Judging by his wheezing, there were a few cracked ribs under his armor. Sid used his sword to push himself up. Then he turned to Abeke and glared. “You’ll pay, girl! You will *pay!*”

Abeke sent out two more arrows, but Sid turned both to ash with a flick of his wrist. The power in the crown was building. Stormspeaker hummed, shooting sparks in all directions. Sid’s skin turned a radiant blue. The rain fizzled as it struck him, and his armor ... *glowed*.

Where was Rollan? Had the storm taken him? Abeke couldn’t search the skies for him, not with Sid about to attack.

The Oathbound shook as the power of the crown filled his body. Even his eyes shimmered with blue light. He cried out and charged.

A wall of supercharged air burst forward. Abeke only just jumped away. But it was a jump that carried her twenty feet through the air, and she landed lightly on her toes. Even when drawing on Uraza’s grace, Abeke had never made a jump that far.

“That’s not possible,” whispered Sid.

“My turn,” said Abeke. She’d seen Uraza do this so often, and it always amazed her how the leopard could cover vast distances with seemingly little effort.

Abeke pounced. Just a slight squeeze and a push from her thighs, and she sailed in a high arc, coming down toward Sid, who just stared with

his mouth gaping.

She rammed the tip of her bow into his chest and the discharge of electricity jolted them both in opposite directions.

But as the storm grew, Sid's power multiplied. Already the sparks thickened, forming a flashing shield around him.

He yelled as he slammed his sword down onto her bow. Again and again he struck, yet the seemingly fragile wood held, even as the bolts exploded around them.

"Why ... won't ... it ... break?" he screamed at each blow. He was mad with fury; any skill he had was abandoned in his single-minded rage to smash Abeke to pieces.

But with each thunderbolt, his power decreased. Sid didn't realize what he was doing; he was too filled with blind anger, but Abeke felt it. Each blow was weaker than the last.

She waited until he raised his sword again, then jumped away with a roar. Abeke turned in midair and rammed both heels into his back.

Sid tumbled again, and the Stormspeaker crown rolled off his head.

They both stared at it as it rolled down the path, toward the cliff's edge.

"No!" screamed Sid. All thoughts of the fight were abandoned as he chased after the speeding circlet. "No!"

It rolled faster and faster.

The crown struck a stone and bounced up in the air, spinning and spinning.

"No!" screamed Sid as it went over the edge. "Nooooo!"

Whoosh!

Rollan rose up along the cliff face, grinning. "Lost something?"

He held the crown in the crook of his finger.

Sid turned around. That arrogance was gone, vanished with the swiftness of a lightning bolt. He still held his sword, but the blade looked dull and blunt now. He stared at it, then at Abeke.

Uraza padded up to him and growled. She let Sid get a good close look at those deadly fangs of hers.

Sid threw away the sword and dropped to his knees. "Please, I surrender."

Abeke loaded her last arrow onto her bow. "Rollan? Tie him up."

Rollan landed lightly. His cloak ruffled around his shoulders, then turned limp as plain cloth. He undid Sid's belt and tied his hands behind

his back. Then he nudged Sid to lie facedown in the dirt.

“One down,” said Rollan.

But Abeke didn't reply. Instead she walked to the cliff's edge and looked down toward the stony beach. The sea was ... rising.

The battle was far from over.



KANA AND CORDELIA

A FIERCE FEVER COURSED THROUGH CONOR. HE PANTED on the cliff's edge, his skin too hot to feel the biting rain. He was barefoot, his thin shirt shredded and hanging in tatters, but he barely felt the wind howling in from the sea.

Thunderous waves crashed against the black granite rocks, and storm clouds boomed together above him. Lightning flared and crackled.

Every muscle burned. He could barely contain the feral power that threatened to explode his heart.

Conor threw back his head and howled.

Briggan joined him, baying at the sky. Conor had never felt such kinship. The bond they had surpassed anything they'd previously known.

He paused, and sniffed the air. "A scent," he growled.

Meilin looked around. "There's no one here."

He crouched down, almost on all fours. He wrinkled up his nose. "There is."

A cluster of rocks lay ahead of them. The rocks were old and covered in moss, their gray blending to green to match the grass tufts that covered the cliff top.

There was nothing there to *see*....

"Kana," he growled. "Come out."

The shadows between two of the larger boulders moved. One moment the path ahead was clear, then the next there stood the captain of the Oathbound. Her chameleon was settled on her shoulder.

Kana nodded at Conor. "So much for my ambush."

Meilin's gaze darkened.

Conor didn't need his second sight to know what would have happened. They would have walked straight past Kana, and one of them would have gotten a sword in their backs before they'd even realized the danger.

"It doesn't have to be like this," said Meilin, stepping forward. Jhi stood up beside her, and for a moment Conor wondering if the Great Panda would attack. Instead, Jhi watched the woman with a curious gaze.

"Out of my way, Meilin," Conor said. "I'll deal with her. She can't hide from me while I hold the staff."

But Meilin only stepped closer to Kana. "Please, you know what Song's become. You know what carnage will follow if you let her carry on."

Kana put her hand on the amulet around her neck, the Heart of the Land. "Song's rewarded me well for my loyalty. It is my duty to protect her."

"Song's greatest enemy is herself," Meilin persisted. "She's on the path of destruction and ruin, Kana. And you know it."

All Conor could do was watch. But he saw the doubts fill Kana's eyes.

"I cannot betray my friend."

"I'm not asking you to betray Song." Meilin was only a few feet from Kana. The length of a sword blade. Yet Meilin held out her hand. "I'm asking you to help us save her."

Conor held his breath. Kana still gripped her sword, and he was too far to help.

But Jhi was with Meilin. She padded up to Kana and looked up at her with her silvery eyes.

Meilin gently touched her hairpin, and Conor could almost feel the waves of ... serenity ... of *peace* radiating from Meilin.

Sometimes it was easy to forget there were other ways to resolve misery and strife. The quiet ways, too often drowned out by the din of battle and the clash of weapons. Looking at Meilin and Jhi together, Conor couldn't help but marvel at the tranquil strength they held.

Hairpin in place, Meilin was the quiet center in the storm. If only more could hear this silence: the tranquility of Jhi the Peacefinder.

Conor saw Kana drop her sword. *She* had heard that silence.

Kana looked at Meilin. "Please. Help me save my friend."

Smiling, Meilin held out her hand. “I’ll do—”

An arc of flame exploded through the air, striking Kana and sending Meilin and Jhi crashing to the ground.

Conor wiped the rain from his eyes and growled from deep in the back of his throat.

Cordelia stood a distance away, both hands firmly gripping the hilt of the Wildcat’s Claw. Flames licked the bare steel, and the raindrops hissed into steam as they fell upon the metal. She sneered at them. “Kana, you traitor.”

Kana lay on the flame-scorched earth, moaning. The flames had hit her hard. Conor could barely look at the damage they’d done. But Jhi was kneeling beside her, and Conor could feel, even from where he stood, the gentle waves of healing energy radiating from the giant bear.

Meilin leaped beside him, clutching Kana’s discarded sword, but Conor shook his head.

He glanced back at the mortally injured Kana. “Go! Help her! Jhi will need you.”

Then, teeth gritted, he turned to face Cordelia. “She’s mine.”

“Think you can beat me, dog?” sneered Cordelia. Despite the pouring rain, she stood steady. “Come here and I’ll turn your pet into my rug.”

Briggan snarled and circled the Oathbound killer.

Conor’s heart pumped hot, raging blood through him. He smelled the sweat upon Cordelia’s brow, the oil upon her armor, and even the animal fat she’d used on her boots as polish. He could hear Cordelia’s beating heart, her ragged breaths, and even in the firelight of her blade, he saw her hesitation.

Cordelia the Kind was used to lashing helpless sailors, beating down on the weak. Now she was looking at someone who wasn’t afraid to fight her, someone who actually *relished* facing her.

In spite of himself, Conor grinned, baring his teeth the way he’d seen Briggan bare his own a thousand times. His hand clenched the crook at his side.

His bond with Briggan had opened up the world in so many ways, but that bond didn’t compare to what was happening now—nor the pure joy he felt.

The joy of the hunt.

Conor howled as he charged, startling even Cordelia.

He crashed into her and they tumbled over the rocky ground. Cordelia rammed the hilt of her sword into his back as Conor swiped at her with his shepherd's crook. She kicked him in the chest, and the pair rolled apart. Conor sprang to his feet while Cordelia stumbled, stunned by his ferocity, and weighed down by her armor. "An animal, that's all you are ..."

Conor saw the attacks before they came. It was just so clear what Cordelia would do. He spun and easily dodged her blows.

Cordelia screamed at him, wild incoherent cries of rage and frustration as killing blows missed by inches. Conor responded with heavy blows of his own, kicks and punches, battering her down until she swayed, fanning flames out from the sword to hold him off.

Briggan joined in, snapping and clawing at any slight opening in Cordelia's defenses. The wolf leaped and pounced from all directions. He buried his fangs into Cordelia's leg armor, almost throwing her down. Cordelia swung with her sword, stabbing him, and the wound scored Briggan's shoulder. The wolf's attacks only became more ferocious.

"Filthy animal!" Cordelia screamed. She took a two-handed grip on the sword and bore down on Conor with a series of savage slashes.

Conor tightened his grip upon his crook as each blow fell.

"Nothing but a stick, that's all you have. I'll turn it into kindling!" snarled Cordelia.

Conor gave her a toothy grin. Then, without thought, he threw up his crook.

The Wildcat's Claw bit into the wood, an inch from Conor's skull. If he'd been a moment too slow ... And yet he knew the blow would come. Just as he seemed to know more and more of what was to come. And who would eventually win this fight.

"Break!" screamed Cordelia, heaving her whole weight behind the sword. "Why won't you break?"

Yet Conor's crook held fast, despite the steel edge and the flames. He'd seen that sword slice through stone as if it were nothing, but the old wood held.

They fought on, each landing blows that would have crippled a normal person. Briggan's near limitless endurance kept Conor standing, despite the bleeding cuts across his limbs and torso, and Cordelia's sword gave her the fury and swiftness of the legendary wildcat.

But Conor needed this fight to be over soon. Something terrible was coming. He felt it like a flood rushing over him.

Cordelia's armor protected her from the worst of the blows, but he had no such protection. Cordelia knew it. She was smiling. "Your legs starting to feel a bit wobbly, boy? That's the blood loss. All my little scratches, they add up in the end."

Conor wasn't interested in wasting time on talk. A dark shape was filling his vision. A great and all-consuming wave. He could see it clearly. Too clearly. It was the same wave from his dreams, and it was headed toward ...

Huge waves battered the cliffs. Conor watched a chunk of rock crack. It tumbled away to crash into the sea.

"Song's using the Dragon's Eye," said Cordelia. She chuckled. "She took to it quickly. It's powerful, boy, especially when combined with her water dragon. Soon she'll be sending a tidal wave all the way across the sea. It'll build, mile by mile, and when it hits Greenhaven? Your Greencloak friends won't be getting any trial."

Conor saw it all. How could he have missed it before? The future was laid out to him, as clear as Cordelia's burning eyes.

But no future was totally certain.

"Your mistress isn't the first to try and destroy the Greencloaks," he said. "And she won't be the last."

"Either way, you won't be around to find out."

Cordelia jabbed, then reversed her blow, catching Conor's staff and knocking it out of his hands. It flipped ten feet away.

Unarmed, Conor felt Briggan's strength suddenly drain from him. His second sight cut away abruptly, leaving Conor feeling momentarily blind. He could barely hold Cordelia back. A deep cut across his ribs had him gasping; another along his thigh brought him to one knee.

But the wolf in him wouldn't, couldn't, give up. Even as Cordelia raised her sword to finish him off, he leaped forward, grabbing her wrists.

"Let go!" she yelled.

He couldn't hold on for long. Conor's head swam. Cordelia, seeing his injured side, rammed her knee into the heavily bleeding wound, laughing as she did it again and again.

Conor fought against the pain and weariness threatening to bring him down. He grabbed at the sword in Cordelia's hand.

They struggled and slipped. The rain had made the rocky, bare edge of the cliffs treacherous underfoot. Barefoot, Conor's feet suddenly burned with pain, but he found easy purchase on the stone. Cordelia still wore the heavy, stiff armored boots she'd fallen in the sea with during their last fight.

She twisted the sword from his weakening grip, and Conor stumbled back.

Smiling, Cordelia pulled the sword past her shoulder and swung.

Conor ducked.

Cordelia spun on the spot, carried away by the force of her swing. She screamed as it carried her over the edge.

Conor ran to the side of the cliff.

Cordelia hung a few feet below, her fingers clenched around the section of rock. She still held the Wildcat's Claw in the other hand.

Conor cursed. The temptation of leaving her to fall was powerful. But he flattened himself on the ground and reached out. "Take my hand."

Cordelia glared at him.

"Drop the sword and take my hand," ordered Conor. "It's the only way."

"No! The Claw is mine!"

"Don't be a fool, Cordelia!"

Cordelia screamed as she thrust the sword tip at him in a desperate lunge. But the tip struck against the rock, a jarring blow that shook Cordelia loose.

Their eyes met. The rage in hers faltered as her fingers came away from the rock. She began tilting away from the cliff face.

Her eyes widened, first in shock, then in fear. Still she held on to the precious sword.

Cordelia opened her mouth, but if she screamed Conor didn't hear it over the thunder of the waves. They seemed to reach up for her as she fell. Cordelia was there, and then she was not.

Conor groaned and sank into the ground.

It wasn't the pain from his cuts. Those felt distant and vague. It was the weariness. Conor couldn't move; his entire body lay there, like lifeless stone.

He tingled, suddenly chilly. Then he didn't feel much at all as a strange, peaceful numbness spread over him.

Briggan sat down beside him, pressing his warm furry body against his own. The wolf panted, his eyes bright and concerned. He licked Conor's face. Conor laughed, but his chest ached.

"Conor!" Suddenly, Meilin was beside him. She turned him over and he saw shock spread across her face. "Oh, no. Oh, please ..."

He wanted to tell her he was fine, but moving his lips was too much effort. So was keeping his eyes open.

"No, you don't," she said. Meilin put her hands upon the wide tear across his side.

The feeling of heaviness ... lifted.

The numbness fell away as he warmed. A fresh, pulsing energy ran through him. Conor heard his heart pounding with new strength.

He opened his eyes. "I knew you would save me," Conor said. "I saw it."

Meilin smiled, looking puzzled. "How are you feeling?"

Conor sat up. The wound on his ribs had gone. There wasn't even a scar. "I feel ... like new."

"Good." Meilin helped him to his feet. "Because we now need to stop that."

Waves, fifty feet high at least, pounded the cliffs, sending tremors through the rocks and into Conor's bones. The sky was thick with swirling storm clouds, and lightning blistered the blackness.

Down on the beach, among the crashing waves, Song stood alone. She held the Dragon's Eye aloft and it glowed with power.

Out in the swirling waves, Conor saw her water dragon. He watched him glide, row upon row of spiky scales cutting through the surface. Finally the tail pounded the surface, driving the creature under. It was easily as tall and as broad as an oak trunk.

The Dragon's Eye had transformed the small water dragon into a gargantuan monster.

"How's Kana?" Conor asked, collecting the shepherd's crook from the ground. As soon as it was in his hands he felt stronger. His heart beat again with the blood of the wolf.

"She'll live," Meilin said. She pointed behind him. Conor turned to find Kana sitting up beside Jhi. The burns had been reduced to a faint reddening of her skin. Her arms were wrapped around herself. Toey, her chameleon, was nestled on her shoulder. The Oathbound captain had tears running down her face. She suddenly looked very young.

“Please,” Kana said, her voice cracking. “You have to stop Song.”



SONG AND MEILIN

MEILIN COULD BARELY STAND AS THE WIND REACHED hurricane proportions. Zhong's coast was vulnerable to such winds, but not this time of year, and never so swiftly.

The waves beat against the cliffs with terrifying fury. It was as if the sea had a mind, but one consumed with unquenchable rage.

She stared down at the ships in the docks. One had been ripped free and was even now being pummeled by the rising sea. Another, also torn from its holding, was wrecked against the rocks that embraced the quayside. She saw men floundering in the churning waters.

And the cliffs themselves shook, unable to withstand the onslaught.

Apart from the wreckage now littering the beach down below, there was just one figure. Her loose hair fanned out in the wild winds. Her elegant green robes billowed around her. The Dragon's Eye, held aloft, shone with a brilliant rainbow of colors.

"Song," muttered Conor. He was breathing hard and his torso was splashed with blood, but the fire in his eyes burned with feral intensity. "We need to get down there."

Out in the dark, deep sea, Meilin saw how the waves were building. Each rose a few feet higher than the last. Song stood balanced on a huge boulder, but Meilin didn't think it would be long before the beach was submerged. Didn't she realize that?

Abeke joined them at the cliff's edge. She pointed to the narrow path leading down. "We need to take the Dragon's Eye from her."

Rollan glided down out of the storm, accompanied by Essix. His cloak fluttered around his shoulders, the tips still dancing in the breeze. “I’ll fly down there and distract her.”

A loud rumble turned their attention away from the beach to the palace.

A tower swayed as the ground beneath it cracked. It tilted this way and that, not quite falling, as more and more cracks broke along its marble surface. Then it leaned over the cliff and first the uppermost level broke away, disintegrating into smaller clunks as the pieces shattered upon the granite cliffs. The rest of the tower soon followed, breaking apart into countless white stones. They burst upon the black rocks below and were instantly swallowed by the sea.

“It’s all coming down,” Meilin said with horror. “The whole cliff’s collapsing, and the palace is going with it.”

Even from where they stood, they could see people fleeing—servants, soldiers, and other nobles. Walls ripped apart and roofs caved in. The tall, elegant windows along the palace façade shattered.

Meilin turned to Jhi. “Go to the palace. Help the injured as best you can.”

The big panda hesitated.

Meilin touched the hairpin. “With this, I’ll always have you with me. Go. Let me deal with Song.”

The panda wrapped her paws around Meilin, and Meilin felt a surge of warm, supportive strength pass into her. Then the panda ran, in her own funny way, off to the collapsing palace.

Down on the beach, Song didn’t so much as turn her head toward her crumbling palace. She was focused on the rising tsunami.

And the creature stirring within the battling waves.

Scales rippled just under the surface. A tail, as long and as thick as any column, flicked from side to side.

Conor frowned. “Song’s water dragon has grown a bit since we last saw him.”

Lightning cracked in the tumultuous black clouds. Rain lashed down, sharp and stinging and hard. The raindrops were thrown horizontal by the howling winds.

Meilin looked to her friends, poised on the edge of the cliff top. Conor grinned, then raised his head and howled. It was a challenge, it seemed to her: a cry of defiance at nature itself. He stretched out his

arms, eyes closed, relishing the elemental attack. Then he gritted his teeth and bounded along the crumbling cliff path with Briggan beside him.

It was a long way down. Meilin hated the way the pebbles broke off the edge of the path with every tremor. But she needed to stop Song.

How big was Seaspray now? When they'd arrived, Meilin could have carried him in her arms. But now? Even his tail seemed to go on forever.

He turned and turned, churning the sea, creating waves that grew as they spread away from the center. Those crashing against these cliffs were forty or fifty feet high. But the waves being carried toward Greenhaven—how high would they grow?

Enough to drown the island, unless they stopped Song.

Step lightly, and step fast.

Could the path take her weight? Many of the steps had already cracked. Meilin moved on tiptoe, jumping from one ledge to another, never pausing lest the ground beneath her give way.

The cliff shook, and she curled up as rocks tumbled down, showering her with grit and earth.

“Meilin!”

Abeke grabbed her arm and hauled her away as a boulder crashed down the cliff, taking more rock with it.

Any one of those could have turned me to bloody pulp.

Heart in her throat, she could only nod her thanks. Abeke winked. “I’ll see you down there.” Then she squatted down and leaped, clearing a dozen feet and seemingly running over the path without touching it.

Uraza stopped beside her, tail twitching.

Meilin looked down at her. “I’ll be fine. You go.”

The leopard didn’t wait for her to change her mind. She pounced from one boulder to another after Abeke.

A wave struck, throwing Meilin against the cliff. She gulped down a rush of freezing seawater. The weight of it pushed her hard into the stone surface. Meilin panicked, sure that the water would crush her, but then it surged away just as her air ran out. Meilin stood, shivering, bedraggled, and gasping on the uneven path. Looking down, she saw that she was still fifty feet above the beach.

And within the madness there was Song. The empress stepped up onto a higher rock, holding the Dragon’s Eye aloft. She was still raising the sea to greater, more monstrous heights.

“Song!” Meilin yelled, her voice battling against the winds. “You have to stop! You’re going to destroy everything!”

Song turned. Somehow she had heard Meilin over the thunder and the crashing waves. But Song just laughed, scornful of Meilin’s desperate plea.

The Eye was smashing everything around it, but Song didn’t care. She’d been granted unimaginable power, and she wanted to use it. The price didn’t matter.

“Song! Please! You have to stop!”

Another wave crashed against the cliff, but Meilin was ready. Taking a huge breath, she dove into the sea.

The churning black waters tossed her over and over. Meilin covered her head, in case she was smashed back against the cliff.

She couldn’t fight such power. She could only be carried by it. Her father had trained her in martial arts from an early age, so Meilin knew how to deal with opponents bigger and stronger than her.

She relaxed, allowing herself to be rolled, then carried out in the backwash.

Now she beat her arms and legs as hard as she could, finally breaking the surface.

The beach was almost fully submerged. Nothing remained of the ships or docks but shattered splinters and ragged sails. Whole sections of the cliff had sheared away, forming a jagged, uneven range of peaks and plinths. The slanted stone was slick with seawater and clumps of earth.

Meilin gritted her teeth and headed to one of the largest stones, the one where Song stood.

Where were the others?

Abeke leaped from rock to rock, but could not yet reach Song. An enormous whirlpool had formed between them, spinning madly. Uraza prowled along the water’s edge, roaring in frustration.

Rollan rode the winds, but the air was buffeting him back. The churning sea exploded at him with fists of water.

Conor battled against the monstrous water dragon out among the waves. Briggan rode the gigantic lizard’s back, clawing at his scales, looking for an opening. Seaspray lashed out and snapped his jaws, which were big enough to break a ship apart. But Conor seemed to know where the dragon’s chaotic bites would fall before even he did. As Seaspray smashed into a recently abandoned rock, Conor jumped on the lizard’s

back, high up between his shoulder blades. Seaspray roared and shook, tossing Briggan into the water, but Conor held on, having found a spot the water dragon couldn't reach.

They couldn't beat the water dragon, but they kept him distracted enough.

Meilin's whole body ached from her swim, but Song's rock was a few yards away. She needed to push just a little bit harder.

The sudden surge slammed her against the rock, winding her. Meilin hooked herself onto the slippery stone as the water receded. She hung there, gasping.

She flicked her hair from her face and stood up. "Song. Stop it. Now."

The princess spun around, startled. Then she smiled and laughed mockingly. "Meilin! Look at you! The pretty general's daughter resembles a drowned rat."

Meilin didn't even have enough strength to stand up straight. She slouched, her legs wobbling from sheer exhaustion. The swim hadn't been far, but it felt as if she'd fought the entire sea to get here.

Song held out the Dragon's Eye. "Here. Take it. If you can."

"This isn't a game. Thousands will die if you go any further."

Song smiled. "Take it."

Meilin shot out her hand, but Song's blow was lightning fast, a heel palm strike that almost knocked Meilin back into the sea. She tottered on the edge, arms flailing, while Song laughed.

"Come now, Meilin. Is that the best you can do? I had heard your father trained you to be a great warrior. Well, I trained, too, you see, far from the eyes of my father. All in preparation for the day I would kill him."

Meilin shook the last of the fuzziness from her head. She planted her feet firmly on the water-slick rock and flexed her fingers.

Song shifted her weight from one foot to another, keeping high on the balls of her feet. She needed to be wary of—

Song's first kick flicked out low. Meilin blocked, but the blow had barely touched her before Song spun and smacked her other heel right into Meilin's jaw.

This time she fell.

"Poor Meilin," muttered Song. "That feint is the oldest trick in the book."

It was, and she'd fallen for it.

Meilin got back up. She glared at the princess.

Song's gaze darkened. "I thought you of all people would understand. You truly are pathetic, Meilin. Happy to stand in the shadows of lesser folk, allowing them to take charge and rule your life. I would pity you if I wasn't so disgusted."

Meilin shook her head. "Well, I do pity *you*, Song. What have you achieved? Death and destruction. You'll find the throne room a lonely place. Even if all the kingdoms of Erdas bow down before you, it will be an empty victory. No one will trust you. No one will admire you. They'll fear and hate you. Just as you feared and hated your father." She held out her hand. "There's still time to turn back, Song. Kana is waiting for you up at the palace."

Meilin felt a strange, peaceful energy radiating out with her words. The hairpin. Her connection to Jhi, the Peacefinder, had imbued their bond token with an uncanny ability to calm the anguished. This was how Meilin had finally overcome Kana—not with blows, but with words. It was Jhi's greatest gift.

And it wasn't working.

Song screamed and launched forward.

Song's blows rained down, but they were clumsy and unfocused. All skill and tactics vanished in her rage. A twist, a deflection, a side step robbed Song of their power, while Meilin came in close, denying the empress her most powerful kicking attacks.

Meilin needed the Dragon's Eye.

A wrist lock forced Song to her knees. "Drop the Eye, Song," Meilin said. "Drop it!" She added a little more pressure, and Song screamed. "Just drop it and this can all be over!"

"Meilin! Look out!"

She turned toward the cry. Abeke stood, balanced perilously on a shard of rock, pointing to the sea.

Meilin looked.

Song's water dragon rose up out of the water, jaws widening as he bore down on her.

Seaspray had come to save his partner.

The distraction was enough for Song to twist free. She stumbled away. "Kill her! Kill her!"

Meilin leaped off the rock a second before the water dragon slammed down. The stone disintegrated, and Meilin was lost to the churning sea.

Wave after wave pummelled Meilin. She couldn't break out of the water! Her lungs burned as she tried to hold on to her breath, but it was getting harder. She didn't have any strength left. The surface, the air, was just beyond her fingertips, but her legs wouldn't push her up the few feet she needed.

The wake generated by the water dragon twisted her over and over, sending her crashing against one rock and then another; the ragged corners tore at her skin.

Her arms hung limply in the water. She couldn't do any more.

Meilin raised her head, feebly, toward the surface. Lightning flashed across the sky and a huge shadow passed overhead. She tried, one last time, to reach up, but her limbs felt as heavy as lead.

Her friends needed her....

Powerful fingers grabbed hold of her collar and locked tightly around the material. Then she was hauled out of the water with a roar.

Meilin gasped, filled her chest with the salty air, as Rollan flew her gently to the cliff ledge where Abeke was waiting.

Meilin rolled over, coughing out water.

Rollan held her hand as she did. "Interesting technique. Were you hoping to drink the entire sea?"

Despite herself, Meilin laughed. "Thank you."

"Of course," Rollan said, his voice gentle. "Don't scare me like that." Meilin realized his hand was shaking. She squeezed it, and he squeezed back.

"It's not over yet," Abeke said. She and Rollan lifted Meilin back to her feet.

Conor and Briggan continued fighting the water dragon, with Song now riding upon his back.

The two didn't have a chance.

Seaspray lashed out with his tail and knocked Briggan across the water. The wolf spun over the surface like a skipping stone before Conor called him into passive.

Conor tried to climb up after Song, but the dragon buckled, flipping him off. He splashed down, disappearing for a few heart-freezing moments, before breaking the surface. Using his shepherd's crook as a float, he paddled toward cover.

"Watch yourself," said Abeke as she pulled Meilin against the cliff wall.

Rocks fell past them.

“This whole cliff’s coming down,” said Rollan. “And the palace with it. It’s right above us.”

The cliff shook again, and the sound of it drowned out the thunder.

But not the lightning. Song appeared just off the cliff, outlined in the brilliant flashes. Song glared from her high seat on the dragon’s shoulders.

She’s beyond help, Meilin realized bleakly. All she has now is blind anger.

All she has ...

“Song!” Meilin cried. “Come get me, you coward!”

“Meilin ...” warned Rollan. “We’ve got to go. Now.”

Meilin ignored the pebbles falling all around her. The cliff was coming down.

She cupped her hands and shouted. “Your father may have been cruel, but you’ve become everything you hated about him! You seized the throne by treachery! All you have is through lies and betrayal! What kind of empress will you be?”

Abeke grabbed her wrist and glared at her. “Meilin! We need to get off this ledge!”

The cliff began tilting. The palace above cracked, a large chunk of wall missing them by mere inches.

Song screamed with pure, incoherent fury. The water dragon lurched toward them, determined to finish off Meilin once and for all.

That’s it ...

“Meilin!” yelled Rollan. “Take my hand!”

The thunder was deafening, but it wasn’t from the storm. The rocks above them roared angrily.

Massive chunks of marble, granite, and earth came tumbling down. Abeke and Rollan were right beside her, yelling, but Meilin couldn’t hear them over the noise. This was how the world ended.

The water dragon plowed through the waves. Song glared at Meilin, her hatred consuming her.

“Come on ...” muttered Meilin.

Seaspray opened his immense jaws and gave out a deep, dreadful roar.

He rose up. Ten feet, then twenty.

“We’re going!” Rollan locked his arms around Meilin’s waist. Abeke prepared to leap.

The water dragon towered over them. Song’s face was lit by lightning. The wind whipped all around her. She was wild, the Dragon’s Eye burning in her hands with a malevolent light.

Then she glanced up, and Song’s expression twisted from one of rage to terror.

The cliff collapsed.

Abeke leaped from the cliff. Rollan pulled Meilin close and flew.

Song gave a single cry, but it was immediately drowned out by the cataclysmic sound of the entire cliff coming down. The palace tumbled in an avalanche of marble and dirt.

Abeke bounced from one boulder to another, then up onto a ledge wide enough to support her. “Come on!” she ordered as she raced up the broken remains of the path.

Rollan held tightly to Meilin as he followed, the wind whipping his cloak behind them. Meilin looked back, catching glimpses of the destruction behind the billowing cloth.

The water dragon thrashed in blind fury as countless tons of cliff fell down upon him. There was no sign of Song.

No matter how mighty the dragon was, Seaspray couldn’t withstand the onslaught of rock. The dragon vanished as a huge cloud of dust exploded onto the surface of the water.

Meilin’s ears still rang with the sounds of tearing rock for a long time after.

She, Rollan, and Abeke sat on the edge of the cliff, or what remained of it, overlooking the beach. Jhi found them there, and immediately began licking the three, closing the worst of their wounds.

The sea calmed and the storm receded, until all that fell was quiet rain.

Wet, bedraggled, and bruised, Conor came stumbling up the cliff path to collapse down beside them, too exhausted to speak. He released Briggan. The wolf went to the edge of the cliff and howled. Uraza sat down beside Abeke and nuzzled against her.

Essix circled above, her great wings unfurled as she rode the sea wind.

The sun broke through the clouds. A strip of blue sky appeared. Meilin leaned back into the grass, letting the sunlight warm her.

It was over.



PEACE

ESSIX SOARED OVER THE BEACH. THE SUN SHONE brightly in a cloudless sky with a whispering wind. The sea itself was a calm mirror, the waves gently lapping upon the pebbles and ruins.

A grand ship waited a mile out, its wide sails displaying the colors of the Niloan High Chieftain. All other boats and ships were now just driftwood.

Rollan sat on what had been the outer gatehouse of the palace. He followed the flight of the falcon and was more than tempted to take off after her. But the seagulls seemed upset enough with Essix in the sky. No telling how they'd react to *him* flying among them.

Instead, he patted his cloak, neatly folded beside him. *Did you see me, Tarik?* he thought. *I flew! Just like Essix. Your cloak became my wings. You saved me again.*

Soldiers explored the beach, still searching for the remains of Song and Seaspray. They found nothing. Wherever the empress and her spirit animal were, the sea had them now.

But others had been recovered. Not far away were three bodies, covered in green cloaks. A guard sat beside them and someone had already placed flowers upon each.

Rollan's heart was heavy. Kofe, Lady Cranston, and Salaman had all perished trying to save him, a boy they hardly knew.

They were Greencloaks.

He rested his palm on Tarik's cloak. It was a coarse piece of cloth, old and threadbare in places; it had been torn and repaired a dozen times. To

look at it, one might think it was little more than rag, but to him it was priceless.

Even more so now.

The life of a Greencloak was not one of peace and comfort. They spent their days on the road, and their nights under the stars. They made mistakes. Occasionally big ones.

But they were always there when it mattered most, trying to help. Sometimes they failed, but they never gave up.

“Come down from there, Rollan.” Meilin beckoned him from below. “The engineers haven’t declared the building safe.”

“I’m fine here,” he said. “Why don’t *you* come *up*?”

She folded her arms defiantly. “We can’t all fly, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Sighing, Rollan tucked his cloak under his arm and climbed down. “Satisfied?”

“There’s breakfast cooking at the camp.”

Rollan’s belly rumbled. “Now you’re talking.”

The “camp” was a chaotic cluster of tents—large and small, elegant and tatty. Jhi sat happily in the grass with a fistful of bamboo. Some of the smaller children of the palace staff watched her in rapt awe. Jhi generally ignored them, but any sudden movement had them shrieking.

Abeke and Uraza were on the beach. The big leopard was sniffing around the ruins, the same way Briggan and a few of the hunting dogs were searching what was left of the palace. Not everyone had been accounted for, including Brunhild the Merry and Wikam the Just.

But most of the Oathbound were. Cordelia’s body was under a sheet, and Kana and Sid sat in chains at the edge of camp.

Rollan saw them in the distance. The Zhongese nobles weren’t leaving anything to chance. Three of the biggest warriors the palace could spare were acting as babysitters.

Kana caught his eye. She gave him a weak smile and a little shrug—*What can you do?*—then glanced down to Toey curled in her lap.

But the longer Rollan watched her, the more he saw the pain beneath. Kana was good at hiding, but Rollan had always been good at seeing people.

The Oathbound captain had lost everything, including her best friend.

“What’s going to happen to her?” he asked.

Meilin glanced to the prisoners. “I don’t know,” she said. “They’ll be in prison for a long time. And the Oathbound will be disbanded, of course.” She sighed. “I’ll speak on her behalf. In the end, Kana surrendered. She was trying to help her friend. That should count for something.”

Rollan shook his head. It hadn’t been so long ago his only concern had been where to get his next meal. Now the fate of kingdoms rested on his shoulders. He paused and sniffed. “Something smells good.”

“What is it?”

He tapped his nose. “Let’s just follow and find out, shall we?”

They came to a small campfire with a large cauldron bubbling over it.

A soldier handed them each a bowl of vegetables and noodles. A few herbs floated in the green liquid; it smelled delicious. Rollan’s stomach growled with approval, and impatience. He took a spoon and scooped a mouthful. The soup burned, but it was good. He savored every morsel.

A shadow fell over Meilin and Rollan as they ate.

Rollan squinted. “Chief Ugo?”

He smiled. “The same.” He sat down beside them. “What an extraordinary night.”

“I’m glad your ship survived.”

The big man nodded as he accepted his own bowl. “It’s a good thing we were anchored offshore. Still, it was a rough night for Worthy and the other prisoners.”

“How *is* Worthy?”

“Convinced he’ll never be a sailor.”

The chief turned to face them. “What you and your companions did is incredible.”

Meilin spoke. “How’s Greenhaven?”

“Safe. Whatever cataclysm Song was summoning, it died with her. Port cities from here to Greenhaven will have suffered flooding, but the great wave never made it. With Song dead and two bond tokens back in safe hands, the truth of what happened is being carried to the Citadel. The Greencloaks are exonerated.” He finished off the bowl and stood up. “Now my business here is ended, and I’m looking forward to getting sand between my toes. Next time you’re in Nilo, come visit.”

Rollan winked at Meilin. “Always good to have friends in high places.”

“I’ve *always* had friends in high places,” replied Meilin, smiling.

Rollan laughed. “I was born in the gutter. Let me savor the moment.”

Meilin looked over to a crowd at a nearby tent. “Speaking of high places, we need a word with Ambassador Ying.”

“Ah, leave him to it, Meilin. Today’s too nice a day to talk politics.”

The center of camp was a table salvaged from the kitchens. Ambassador Ying, still dressed in his prison rags, had spent all morning writing letters and instructions. His crane watched, perched up on the top of the adjacent tent. The nobles of Zhong and representatives from the other kingdoms were being summoned to discuss the recent government opening, and how to find a way forward without their empress.

No sooner would he finish one letter than another blank sheet of parchment was put in front of Ying. His fingers were black with ink stains. Riders queued up, their horses saddled and ready.

Rollan refilled his bowl from the simmering cauldron. “There’s going to be a lot of rebuilding.”

“The Summer Palace is beyond saving,” Meilin said. “But there are other—”

Rollan shook his head. “I mean trust. Song assassinated her father. She blamed the Greencloaks. The other rulers will be wary, not just of Zhong, but of each other. And of themselves. Who knows if they have another Song within their own families?”

Meilin looked at him, curiously.

“What?” Rollan wiped his chin. “Have I got something on my face?”

“Right there.” Meilin tapped his forehead. “It looks like wisdom.”

He blushed. “Hey, I keep telling you all how great I am. You just never listen.”

“I know you’re great,” Meilin said, and Rollan felt his cheeks blush even further. *Stupid cheeks.*

Meilin sighed, glancing back to the sea. “Song framed the Greencloaks. She killed countless people, including her own father. But I can’t help but wonder what would have happened if someone had seen how trapped and desperate she was. If someone had done something to help her.”

“You feel bad for her?”

“It doesn’t make any difference.”

A servant approached, falling into a low bow. “The ambassador wishes to speak with you.”

“About what?”

The servant frowned. "I think he has a request of you."

Rollan groaned. "Can't he get someone else? In case you hadn't noticed, we did nearly have a palace fall on our heads last night."

Meilin laughed and nudged him. "Let's find out what he wants, at least."

Rollan swallowed the last of the soup down, then headed off to the heart of the camp. Abeke and Conor joined them, their spirit animals at their heels.

"Any luck?" Rollan asked.

Abeke shook her head. "Song's gone. They've sent a few boats out, but I doubt they'd find anything now. The storm would have carried her too far out."

Pain flickered across Meilin's face. That was a terrible death, but Song had brought it upon herself.

Rollan put his hand on her arm. "You tried to help her, Meilin. You really did."

Ambassador Ying stood up as they arrived. He stretched out to his full height, which wasn't much. "All this hunching over letters isn't doing me any good."

"You need us for something?" asked Rollan.

Ying arched one white eyebrow. "There will always be work for Greencloaks. There's no escaping it, boy."

Rollan rolled his eyes.

Ying laughed, and Rollan thought he could still hear a bit of the crazy old man in him. "The Dragon's Eye and the Wildcat's Claw are gone. That's half of our order's precious *gifts*. But the best gift is peace, don't you think? Peace ... and the truth. Which will be hard for some to bear."

"The truth about Song?" asked Meilin.

"I pity the poor girl," the old man said with a sigh. "She was kind, once, Meilin. You could see that, couldn't you?"

Meilin nodded.

"But that kindness will be forever lost. Her name will become a cursed one, as will the memory of her. She was misguided, twisted by ambition and anger. I think perhaps I share some of the blame for that. I didn't do enough to protect her. To help foster her bond. But we cannot hide her crimes, for then innocents suffer." He handed her a scroll. "Take this to Greenhaven."

Meilin took it, but held it gently. "What's it say?"

“Everything. The Greencloaks were framed, and I have the signatures of a whole palace full of witnesses to prove it. That should quash any hint of our order’s misdeeds. Present that letter to Olvan. We’ll need to convene another conference at the Citadel.” He looked darkly at the two chained captives. “There will be a trial. All will be made public soon.”

Rollan looked at the tube of paper. They were going back to Greenhaven. Relief flooded through him.

A soldier approached. He saluted and then whispered to Ying. The old man smiled. “That’s *wonderful* news!” he cried.

“What is it?” asked Conor.

“My breakfast is ready.”

Rollan chuckled, then smacked his lips. “The noodle soup’s pretty good.”

Ying smiled. “I know. It’s my mother’s own recipe.”



“I hope we get a bigger cabin than last time,” said Rollan as he gazed out at the ship.

“I just hope we get rooms of our own.” Conor sat on the beach while Briggan sniffed around the pebbles. His crook lay on the sand beside him. “No offense, but you snore.”

“I do not snore.”

Abeke laughed. “It’s like the trumpeting of a herd of elephants, Rollan.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Abeke shrugged. “I kind of liked it. Reminds me of home.”

Rollan looked over to Meilin. “Is it that bad?”

“Hey, I’m not part of this discussion.” She rubbed her panda’s belly. “I just want to make sure Jhi’s had enough bamboo for the trip.”

Essix circled overhead. With one swoop she scared off a flock of seagulls, then she beat her wings and settled down at the edge of their circle. There was a fish in her beak.

“Fattening up yourself, eh?” Rollan asked.

The falcon set to the busy task of tearing and eating.

The ship was anchored a few hundred yards out. It was evening, but the captain had declared he wanted to set sail at low tide. Ying had been equally keen to get his letter to Greenhaven sooner rather than later.

A rowboat approached, a lantern hanging at the front. The boat bobbed over the breaking waves and the oarsmen jumped out to drag it up.

“That’s our cue,” said Conor. He gave Briggan’s furry cheeks a good shake. The wolf slobbered over his face. “Yuck.”

Then Briggan vanished, and the mark appeared on his arm. Conor gazed at it for a moment, then rolled down his sleeve. He collected his crook, moving it from hand to hand, before settling it in his left. He picked up his rucksack.

Meilin kissed Jhi, and a moment later the panda vanished to reappear as a tattoo on her own forearm. She pulled out her hairpin and retwisted her hair into a long braid before pushing the pin back. She slung a bag over her shoulder and joined Conor.

Uraza licked Abeke’s open palm and then, in a swirl of spots, formed an image on Abeke’s skin. The girl collected her bow and quiver. “Come on, Rollan.”

Rollan gazed over at Essix. “Well?”

The falcon beat her wings and was airborne. She rose almost vertically, soaring over the beach and toward the ship.

“Fine.” Essix could fly alongside.

Rollan patted his folded cloak, his bond token. He felt a gentle tremor through the material, as if it were anticipating the wind passing through its folds once more.

Essix shrieked from above, for all the joy of being free.

Rollan knew exactly how the falcon felt.

He gathered his rucksack and headed down the beach to his friends.



To all the fans who've followed Conor, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan on their adventures—who uncovered the lost histories of the Great Beasts and collected talismans in the online game as the Keeper—thank you. This series has been very dear to us, and we hope it's meant something to you, too.

The journey wasn't always easy. Sometimes sad and scary things happened, just like in real life. But at the heart of this story is the belief that people from different places and cultures can come together for the good of all.

Even if we can't magically summon spirit animals to grant us superhuman powers, we *can* all be more than ourselves. It just takes courage and kindness.

By the Four Fallen,
The Greencloaks

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Sarwat Chadda is a Londoner who's spent a lot of time abroad, from Vietnam to Venice and from Ghana to Guatemala. Not quite the length of Erdas, but not bad. In his life prior to writing, Sarwat was an engineer and worked on projects both high and subterranean. He's published ten novels, all filled with action, mythology, and high adventure, and managed to win an award or two in the process. He can think of no better way to spend the day than in the company of great heroes and dark villains.

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Javi

Next question,” Molly said. “How many miles of wire are in this airplane?”

“Um, a lot?”

“Put your brain to work, Perez. Estimate!”

Javier Perez sighed. “If I get close, will you stop bugging me with these questions?”

“Nope. You need the distraction.” Molly clutched her book of airplane trivia and grinned. “I’ve got at least fourteen hours’ worth. Enough for the whole flight!”

“*You* wanted to sit by her!” Anna said from the row behind, and Oliver laughed beside her.

Javi groaned, wishing the plane would take off so he could lean back and pretend to sleep.

Telling Molly that he was afraid of flying had been a terrible idea. Because that made it her job, as team leader, to distract him—with engineering problems, of course. At Robotics Club every afternoon, Molly always talked while she worked, explaining what she was doing, challenging others to do the same. For her, making robots wasn’t just a hobby, it was a *conversation*.

The funny thing was, the distraction was actually working. Once Javi's brain had latched onto her question, the plane became more than a huge unknown carrying him away from home for the first time ever. Now it was an engineering problem.

How many miles of wire? Javi thought.

The four members of Team Killbot, along with their adviser, Mr. Keating, were sitting in economy. Brooklyn Science and Tech had lots of rich people who donated money to the school, and when the team had qualified for the Robot Soccer World Championships, some millionaire had stepped up to pay travel costs.

But first class to Japan for five people? Nobody had *that* much money to give away.

Even so, this was what Mr. Keating called "fancy economy," designed for fourteen-hour flights. Javi's seat was surrounded by buttons and lights and a video screen. All of which were connected to wires, right?

He'd already tested the buttons on his armrest. They controlled the angle of his seat, a reading light, the screen. There was a button for summoning a flight attendant, and a rocker switch with volume symbols. There was even a little remote control for games (which also seemed to be a phone, in case you needed to call someone from halfway across the Arctic Circle).

Javi found himself wanting to strip it all down, to see those wires, motors, and gears out in the open. He'd been taking things apart as long as he could remember, starting when his mother had let him take apart her busted microwave when he was five years old.

He imagined the wires under the cabin floor, snaking up and around the curves of the chair. And another bright web above him, bringing power to all those lights and air blowers in the ceiling—

"Conjectures?" Molly prompted. "Conclusions?"

Javi's brain buzzed. Each seat would need at least a hundred feet of wire, and there were about five hundred people on the plane. That was *ten miles* right there, on top of the ailerons and engines, the cockpit crammed with gauges, the extra wires needed for the huge business class seats a few rows ahead.

Too much to calculate, so he multiplied his first guess by ten.

"In the whole plane, maybe a hundred miles of wire?"

“Not too bad.” Molly waved her book. “But it’s more like *three* hundred. A technical tour de force!”

“Okay, wow,” Javi said, though amazement was the surest route to more trivia questions. “It seems like a waste, using a machine this complicated to fly our dinky little robots to Tokyo.”

“The Killbots are *not* dinky,” Molly said. “They’re the reigning US champions of robot soccer, junior division!”

Javi shrugged. “May I remind you that the other team’s robots got broken in shipping? We lucked into this.”

“We would’ve won anyway.” Molly’s expression dared him to argue.

Javi wasn’t sure. He’d seen videos of the robots built by the unlucky finalists from New Mexico—scuttling four-legged scorpions that whacked the soccer ball with their tails. In stark contrast, the Brooklyn Killbots were toasters on wheels. Mindless bullies that swarmed the ball, knocking other players out their way.

“Like how five-year-olds play soccer,” one of the judges had muttered in the semifinals.

And there were, what, maybe twenty feet of wire in each Killbot?

Not exactly a technical tour de force.

Last night, Javi’s whole family had gathered for a send-off dinner: uncles, aunts, and cousins all telling him how proud they were. His mother had told stories of him helping on her superintendent rounds when he was little, fixing locks and faucets at age seven. But for the whole dinner he’d felt like a fraud.

What kind of engineer was afraid to get on an airplane?

“Next question,” Molly said. “How many Aero Horizon flights have ever crashed?”

He stared at her. Was she just trolling him now?

If building robots had taught Javi anything, it was that way too much could go wrong with machines. No matter how carefully he tested them, the Killbots were always doing unpredictable stuff in the middle of a match.

He thought about those three hundred miles of wire in the airplane, the millions of rivets and seals and screws, the engines and tanks full of flammable fuel. All those parts that could break, warp, fail, or explode.

“I’m going to go with ... two?” he said hopefully.

“Nope,” Molly said. “Zero!”

“Really?”

“Yep. No crashes in the whole fleet, in forty years.”

“Huh.” Javi felt a relieved smile reach his lips, and his irritation with Molly faded. Even when she was trolling him, she always had a plan. “Thanks.”

She shrugged, as if to say that his fears were forgotten. “Just enjoy the flight, Perez. We’re going to win for real this time.”

Javi gave her a fist to bump. “Team Killbot!”

Mr. Keating leaned forward from the row behind. “Um, guys. Maybe no more discussion of airplane crashes?”

“Actually,” Molly said, “we were discussing the total *absence* of airplane crashes.”

“Still,” Mr. Keating said firmly. “Some people are nervous about flying.”

“Not us engineers.” Molly smiled at Javi. “Next question ...”

“*Last* question,” Javi pleaded.

Molly looked like she was about to argue, but then a *ping* went through the cabin, and a voice announced that the doors were closing.

Javi swallowed. Last night, he had imagined himself jumping up and running off the plane when this moment came. But thanks to Molly’s distractions, he was managing to sit here quietly.

“Fire away,” he said.

“This is my favorite one.” Molly clutched the trivia book close, guarding the answer. “What do flight attendants call it when the oxygen masks drop down?”

Javi frowned. “There’s a name for that?”

“It’s secret flight attendant slang. Let me give you a hint: The oxygen sensor gets tripped, right? And suddenly all those rubber masks fall out of the ceiling. Everyone’s freaking out, screaming like *animals*. So what do flight attendants call it?”

“Um, a really bad day at work?”

“Nope.” Molly gave him a pleased smile. “They call it a ‘rubber jungle.’ Get it? Because everyone goes primal, and there’s all those masks hanging down like vines! And usually it’s just an accident, because of a broken sensor.”

Javi tried to smile back at her, but now he was thinking about those hundreds of masks up in the ceiling, each tightly wound in its little compartment, like snakes ready to spring out and start a panic.

Just one more thing that could go wrong.



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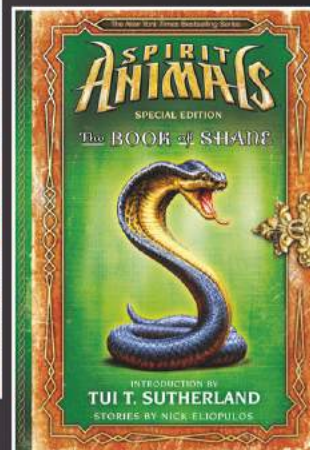
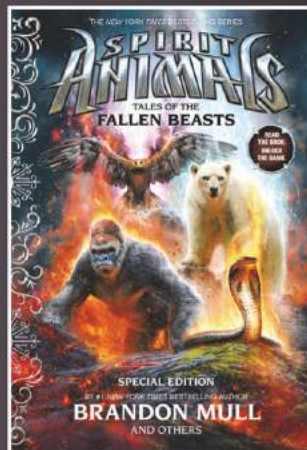
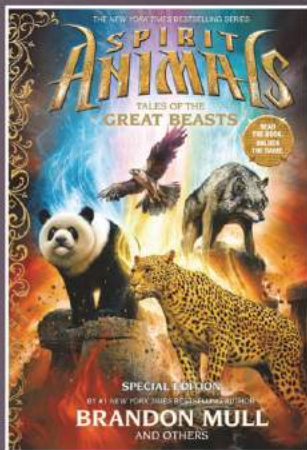


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